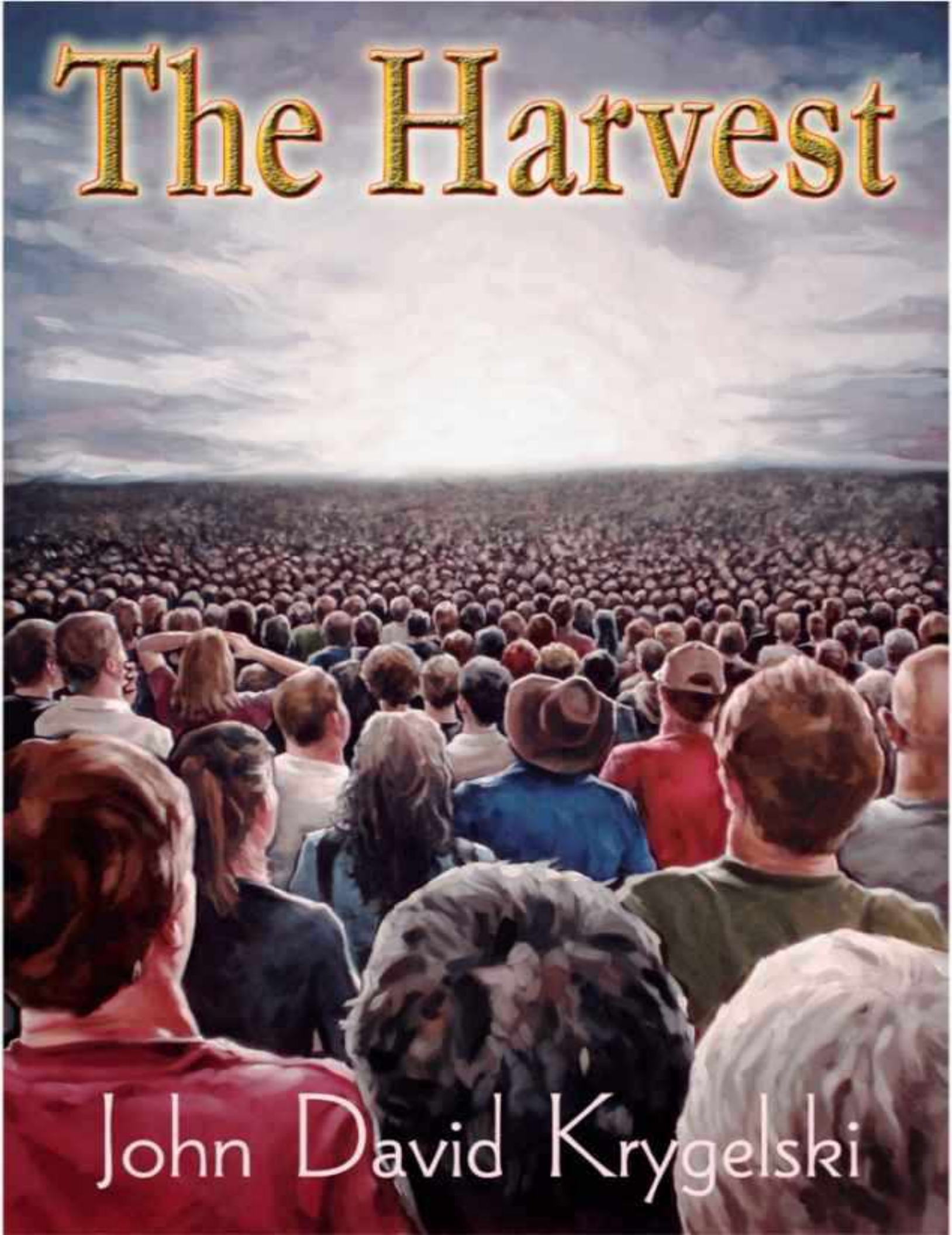
The Harvest



John David Krygelski

The
Harvest

John David Krygelski

Starsys Publishing Company

Dedications:

To Jean…my compass, my friend, my intellectual mate, my own personal devil's advocate when it was needed, my sounding board, my protector, and my love. Her wisdom, insights, and humor are woven throughout this story. I hope this didn't embarrass you.

To Michael Earl Nolan, a special thank you for giving me my first glimpse of Elohim.

To Karin, my amazing daughter "Doc"…the other published author in the family. To Sara, my daughter…a wonderful, dedicated mother. To Michael…my artist, my friend, my son.

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I would like to thank Colleen, whose encouragement, support, and advice meant so much to me as I put together this book.

And, as always, "a tip of the hat and a wink of the eye" to my sons-in-law, David and Jeff, my precious granddaughters, Jeannie Belle and Mally Paige, my dear friend Rachel, and to Rocky, my visiting angel.

The Harvest

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Prologue

The late summer wildflowers were in bloom along the Potomac. Honey bees frantically performed their duties to the hive and to nature, dashing from flower to flower, gathering nectar from each, accumulating pollen as an accidental by-product of their efforts, mindlessly disseminating it to the others as they worked.

The mosquitos buzzed about, searching for an unwitting host to provide their next feast. Flies, deceived by the dappled sparkle of sunlight on the rippling veneer of the water, were captured as they grazed the surface, floating helplessly and struggling to somehow escape. Freshwater fish, lazily roaming the river, sensed as much as saw the flutterings of the insects above and swam rapidly upward, snapping open their mouths and swallowing the unlucky flies.

Out of season, a dull, brown cocoon, attached to the branch of an apple tree, crackled slightly and shivered. The motion detached it from the bark, and it fell to the ground. After a moment of stillness, the cocoon recommenced its flipping, writhing movement on the wild grass, tiny splits appearing in its walls. A shard burst outward, surrendering to the pressure building within. Then a second segment followed. Then a third.

If a scientist or an amateur naturalist had happened by the river bank, and if his or her eye had been caught by the movements of the cocoon, it would have been a surprise to see, not the crushed and bundled sight of a butterfly completing its metamorphosis and effectuating its escape, but something else.

As the last of the husk fell away, exposing its contents to the sunlight, the small bundle started to grow, as if thriving on the energy from the rays. As it grew, it took shape…expanding ever more, until reaching its full size. The process complete, the form remained huddled on the grass. Prompted by no sound, alerted by no approaching threat, its eyes suddenly jerked open, exposing irises as blue as sapphires, encircled by whites as pure as a cottony cloud.

The eyes darted about, surveying the immediate area, as the body unfolded and straightened, revealing the form not of an infant fresh from birth but of a man, fully grown and crowned with whitish-gray hair. The stranger stood and slowly turned, thirstily drinking in the vista before him, seeing wonders in a view overlooked by the others who passed this way.

Having twice completed a full rotation, the man walked steadily to the bank of the river and stepped into the slowly flowing water.

Chapter One

"As all of you know, the current debate centered on religion is fierce. The liberal, or 'modern,' segments of society, composed of scientists, social progressives, and a broad spectrum of other secularists, believe that religion is nothing more than another superstition…another comforting tale told around the primal campfire to calm the young and the ignorant. They believe that religion once filled a void of ignorance. They believe that all of the questions once answered by religion can now be answered by science and that religion has now become irrelevant, superfluous and, in fact, dangerous – dangerous because it does not encourage the kind of questioning and open-mindedness which scientific inquiry requires to flourish. They believe that it is this close-minded, dogmatic nature of the religious which hampers many things. Stem cell research is an example. Although the secular maintain that it has the potential to produce amazing cures, it is opposed by the religious because it can encourage abortion. The religious also prevent society from freely pursuing other lifestyle choices in addition to abortion, such as homosexuality and polygamy. The secular can find no scientific study to indicate that abortion is bad. They can find no studies which show that either homosexuality or polygamy is bad.

"The religious are intense in their opposition to this current trend. They now find themselves in a country founded, at least partially, on the need for religious freedom and wisely structured to separate church and state, a country which now seems to be moving away from freedom *of* religion and moving toward freedom *from* religion. They once enjoyed a daily invocation in every classroom. Daily prayer is now a violation of federal law. They enjoyed an open celebration of their holidays. Today the public display of a nativity on government property is illegal. Yes, they do believe religion filled a void and, to some degree, they agree it was a void of ignorance. Their own churches and universities performed some of the best scientific work in our past. However, they also believe there are many things which cannot be proved empirically…there are many truths which can only be taken on faith. It is their faith – or morality – which tells them that creating an industry which would encourage and reward women for the

production of fetuses is wrong. They agree that there is no scientific study which proves abortion is bad, because all studies exclude the impact of the procedure on the fetus. And it is their belief that homosexuality and polygamy are immoral. Unfortunately, there is not yet a way to scientifically quantify morality."

Reese Johnson paused, allowing the class to absorb some of the concepts. His course, "Religion Under Assault" was, to put it mildly, successful. There were at least three hundred students in the hall, with probably another fifty faculty, parents, and media present. This was his first year at the University of Arizona, indeed his first day. He had not yet had time to decide if he missed Harvard. It was certainly hotter here and not nearly as green. But the university president had promised him an environment where he would have the freedom to teach this course as he wished, teach it without the constraints placed upon him by his previous employer. His disgust over the reality of supposed academic freedom still simmered.

"Throughout this course we will attempt to temper both sides of this argument. We will try to share with all of you the history of religion, not as a dry summation of dates, people, and places, but rather as the way religion fit into key turning points in our past, monumental events which directly impacted our current society. They are events with which you are already familiar, and yet, I promise that you are not familiar with the part religion played in those events. I daresay many of them would not have occurred at all without this influence, and yet, it is rarely taught. But the past is only part of the story. Granted, it will possibly give you an appreciation you might not have had before. It may even soften some of you in this room who are totally immersed in your antipathy for all things religious. However, the past will not address the central issue of this course, which is what value religion has today. Why do we need it? Whom does it help? Why do those of us who do not believe *have to put up with it*? And, most critically, why is it so important to the secular community that religion be eradicated?"

Reese paused a moment again, trying to read the faces. There were several who obviously fit into the last category he described. He could tell

by their pinched looks and slightly purple coloring. There were also many believers in the crowd. They were all smiles. Their case was finally going to be made.

"Any questions at this point?" Reese deliberately picked the most pinched and most purple face which went with a quickly raised hand.

"Professor Johnson."

Reese could tell by the smug look what direction this question would take.

"Do you plan on addressing the IQS of the religious, compared to the secular?" A ripple of barely muted laughter worked its way through the crowd. The student, still standing, turned to look over his shoulder at the audience, his smile broadening.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. …."

"Dubois, Jack Dubois."

"Mr. Dubois, I do intend to address that. Now is as good a time as any. May I ask yours?" Reese's eyes locked on the youngster, watching the smug smile slip away, watching the color slowly drain from his face. "Mr. Dubois?"

Clearing his throat loudly, the student answered, "I don't know. I've never taken the test." He visibly relaxed, starting to feel that he had wriggled off the hook.

"Easily arranged, Mr. Dubois. I'll set it up for tomorrow. In the meantime, I guess we can make do with your SAT score, which was?"

The young Dubois had lost all traces of his excitement-induced purple complexion and was rapidly losing his normal coloring. Still, he did not speak.

"Do you not remember your score?" Reese asked in mock curiosity. "I could have my assistant" – he motioned to Stu Carroll, the postdoc standing off to the left of the hall – "contact the dean's office? Of course, I'd forgotten we need your permission to obtain that information.

"Stu," he said, turning to the standing assistant, "a permission slip? We have one, don't we?"

Smiling, the postdoc answered, "Just happen to, yes, sir."

“Could you bring one to Mr. Dubois?” Pulling a paper from his open backpack, Stu Carroll started across the front of the lecture hall.

“It’s 1120!” The score was nearly shouted by Dubois, looking every bit the broken man. Another round of laughter, less subdued, filled the room. Waiting for the laughter to die down and not quite ready to give up, Dubois turned and, addressing the class loudly, proclaimed, “I was drunk that whole week.” With that final explanation, he dropped heavily back into his seat.

Struggling to repress a smirk, Reese turned his attention away from Jack Dubois and returned it to the entire room. “Any other questions?” Substantially fewer hands were raised this time. Taking his time, Reese looked over his choices, noticing a girl three rows back with brown, kinky hair which looked as though it had not been washed in two weeks and was pulled tightly back, no makeup, a camouflage green T-shirt and khaki cargo pants. He could not see her feet but assumed the mandatory brown sandals were there. Pointing, he said “Yes?”

She stood up ramrod straight, eyes clear and voice confident. “Megan Mislin, Mr. Johnson. My IQ is 144. My SAT was 1590.”

“Excellent, Ms. Mislin. And by the way, it’s Professor Johnson. Your question?”

“Professor Johnson. My question is the obvious one. What is…?”

“My IQ?”

“Yes…sir.” Only the slightest disgust showed in her voice as she spoke the last word.

“Well, you’re not the first to ask. At the risk of sounding coy, I’d rather not say.”

“Oh?” she said, slightly triumphantly.

“Instead, I’d rather make it an assignment. That information is available without a tremendous amount of research. Of course, anymore, a tremendous amount of research is having to do anything more than typing a phrase into a search engine. Those of you who are curious, or feel it is important to know that particular fact about me, can find it.”

From the midst of the hall came a muffled “Shit!”

Glancing in that direction, Reese could see it had originated from a student with a laptop and, obviously, a wireless connection. “It appears someone has already found the answer. Am I correct?”

A scruffy boy, looking barely old enough to be a freshman, answered, “I sure did.”

“There,” said Reese, “see…that was easy enough. Ms. Mislin, since you’re still standing, I assume you still have a question?”

Twisting around to face the student with the laptop, she said, “Well?”

Clearing his throat and looking back down at his screen, the boy finally answered, “207.”

Jamming her hands on her hips and turning to face the front, Mislin barked, “That’s bull…that’s BS,” looking accusatorily at Reese.

Rather than answering her, Reese motioned to the source of the information. “Please stand up. What is your name?”

“Louis Frazier.”

“Mr. Frazier, Ms. Mislin seems to be questioning your fact. Can you back it up?”

Louis did not enjoy addressing a crowd this size. Still holding his laptop, higher now, he turned to directly face his doubter. “Well…uh. Well, I Googled the professor, and a Mayo Clinic paper came up on him. His school tested him in seventh grade and came up with” – he looked back at the screen – “210. They were kind of blown away, so they retested him, and the second score was 206.” Pausing again as he read from the article, he continued, “The school counselor’s wife worked in the psychology department at the Mayo Clinic. The counselor took Professor Johnson there, and they had one of their staff psychologists test him. That score was 207, so it was the one they used.”

The young woman in marine drab was not quite ready to give up. “Okay, like, 207 is real high, but it doesn’t exactly warrant a paper from the Mayo Clinic.”

“No,” said Louis Frazier, “that’s not what the paper is about. It’s about what happened to him after the score was figured out.”

“And what was that?”

Before Frazier could continue, Reese cut in, “Excuse me. This really is my lecture, Ms. Mislin. If you or any others actually might care, as you can see, all of this is readily available on-line. I don’t care to have any more of our time taken up with it.”

Both Mislin and Frazier took their seats. Johnson continued, “I would prefer, before resuming the lecture, to answer a few questions on point. Is there anyone with a question pertaining to our topic?”

Hands came up, he selected, and the questioner rose. “Professor, I’ve noticed in your lecture thus far, as well as in the name of the class, you choose to refer to all of the various faiths as simply ‘religion.’ With the variety of faiths in the world, especially those with differences as broad as Islam and Judaism, how practical is that?”

“Thank you for asking, for that answer is central to our discussions. Throughout most of our history there has been a recognition that all of the faiths are different religions. I know that sounds like a tautology, but I think it will become more clear soon. Granted, there was frequently a dominant religion. Granted, most religions believe and teach that theirs is the one true religion. Oftentimes the dominant religions attempted to convert the others to their belief systems. Sometimes the attempts to convert were rather benign…at other times, more forceful, occasionally violent. And much of this benign, forceful and violent proselytizing was done under the guise of ‘saving’ the souls of the unbelievers or infidels. Occasionally, as in the case of Great Britain, an alternative church was created out of convenience, and then conversion to the Church of England was mandated for all subjects by the Crown. It was to escape this mandate that the first Americans came to this continent.”

Megan Mislin’s hand shot into the air. “Ms. Mislin, I guess you need a reminder as to how a lecture works. With many professors, there is no opportunity for questions at all. I choose to allow them, but only at certain points, which I will make clear by extending an invitation.”

Mislin, undaunted by the admonition and fired by her convictions, nearly shouted back at Reese, “How can you refer to the Europeans arriving here as ‘the first Americans’? The Native Americans were obviously first.”

Reese sighed heavily and, leaning forward, he propped his elbows on the podium. “Okay…we have several items to address here. Megan, please remain standing.”

Having halfway lowered herself down, she jerked back up. “That’s Ms. Mislin,” she snapped.

“Actually, no, it’s not. The formal salutation is intended to be used by the speaker as a sign of respect.” There was a brief pause; then a murmur of laughter bubbled throughout the hall. Reese immediately regretted the harshness of his comment.

Continuing, he asked, “Megan, what word do you use to refer to a homosexual?”

“Gay.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why ‘gay’? Why not ‘homosexual’? Why not any of the other terms available?”

“It’s what they want to be called. It’s what they call themselves.”

“What do you call blacks?”

“African Americans.”

“Why?”

“Same reason.”

“American Indians?”

“Native Americans…for the same reason.”

“Mexican Americans?”

“Uh, Hispanic…no, Latino.”

“Gets a little confusing sometimes, doesn’t it? But you’ve made my point. Please have a seat.” Looking uneasy, suspecting she had been had, but not yet sure how, Megan Mislin sat down.

“When the settlers arrived in America, they encountered Indians. They called them ‘Indians’ because Christopher Columbus, when he discovered America, thought he had found India. The various tribes called themselves many things: Iroquois, Apache, Hopi, et cetera. None called themselves ‘Indians’ or ‘Americans.’ As a matter of fact, *none* of the indigenous people

in North, Central, or South America called themselves ‘Americans.’ The first group to do so were the European settlers, who wanted to separate themselves from the land and people they had left behind. By Megan’s own method, logic, or rationale for nomenclature, they were the first Americans, because ‘American’ was what they wanted to be called.

“Incidentally, Megan, some of the oldest fossilized hominid remains, discovered in North America and claimed as ancestors by the American Indians, have had their DNA remnants amplified by polymerase chain reaction and were apparently identified as most likely being ancestors of Europeans rather than the American Indians.

“The second item I guess I should cover at this point is political correctness. Political correctness is not a path to enlightenment, as some would have you believe. Enlightenment does not occur in an environment of rampant taboos. Political correctness is nothing more than a term used to disguise a true intent. And the intent is mind control, mind control as in brainwashing. As many of you know, I recently came here from Harvard. I was a member of the faculty when one of our administrators was fired for just this issue. Too much has already been said about this subject for me to waste your time by adding more. But I will say this: he was fired from an institution founded on the principle of intellectual freedom, of unfettered thinking and questioning, for the offense of thinking and questioning. I will get further into the concept of brainwashing later.

“Finally, before I return to my lecture, let me note that this is a society of rules. It is also a society of social norms. When someone deviates from a social norm, the people around him let him know by gentle or not so gentle ostracism. Rules, on the other hand, are rarely enforced. Probably ninety-nine percent of the time, people just follow them, out of habit, respect, or fear. If this was not the case, society would be in complete disarray. We do not have nearly enough police to control the population if we all became unruly.”

Pausing and staring directly at Megan Mislin, Reese continued, “If you do not respect the rules of conduct for this class, leave. If you are here to disrupt, leave. If you see yourself as someone who is self-appointed to keep my teachings in line, leave. We are going to frequently step outside the

boundaries established by the political correctness crowd. If you are so frightened that your ideas, principles, and philosophies are not sound enough on their own merit to stand up to the harsh light of brutal analysis and candid discussion, then perhaps you need to re-evaluate those beliefs.

"The students in this room did not sign up to be lectured by Megan Mislin or the other 'Megans' in this hall. They signed up to learn something from me. This is not to say I will not want your input. It is also not to say I want you to leave your passion outside in the hall. And I definitely do not want this lecture hall to be filled with only those who agree with me. But if you disagree, have a reason. Do not begin to discuss unless you have a foundation of thought; otherwise, you are simply shouting out slogans.

"Getting back to rules for one more moment…I've asked you to respect them. If that fails, then I promise you that here, in this class, they will be enforced.

"To continue…throughout all of this give and take, ebb and flow, dominance and subjugation, there was a tacit recognition by many people that each of the faiths was a religion – maybe not the 'right' religion, but a religion nonetheless. This concept flourished in the twentieth century, with most of the western world acknowledging the variety of beliefs and restructuring to accommodate them all peacefully. Proselytizing by the edict or the sword was replaced by the bicycle and pamphlet. This peaceful coexistence, this tolerance, was a long-held dream which was close to coming true. We have a country where a Catholic church, a mosque, and a synagogue can all share an intersection in many major cities.

"To finally answer the question…it is this concept that I have embraced for the purpose of this course. Religion, to me, is a group of faiths or beliefs, each of which describes itself as 'a religion.' There are several major beliefs in the world and literally thousands of smaller ones based upon the size of the group of followers. It would surprise many of you to find how many key tenets among these faiths are shared.

"There is one additional criterion we will use to define the group which we will call 'religion.' Those who have declared a war on religion have their own method of selection. They include in their 'hit list' Evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. They currently exclude the Islam faith –

not for any logical or idealistic reasons, but simply because a faction of Muslims has declared its own war on the Jews and Catholics, and to a lesser degree on the others mentioned. So, like the uneasy relationship between Stalin and Hitler in the 1930s, the secular community has a powerful ally. All of the teachings and beliefs as expressed by the Quran and practiced by the strictest Islam countries are anathema to the secular. Their treatment of women, homosexuals, and children is as far from the espoused beliefs of the secular as humanly possible, and yet we are being told to tolerate, understand, and accommodate them. A valedictorian, during her graduation speech, dared to thank God, and the school administrators pulled the plug on her microphone. Had she thanked Allah, she would have been praised for her courage.

"And so, in short, I am allowing my definition of religion to be shaped by its enemies.

"Another question?"

Reese acknowledged a middle-aged woman near the back of the hall.

"Professor Johnson, it is a pleasure to have you teaching here at the U of A."

"Thank you. It is a pleasure, so far, to be here." Another slight murmur of laughter rippled through the hall.

"My question for you is this: is the secular opposition to religion based upon our beliefs themselves, or something else?"

"Excellent question, Ms. …."

"It's Mrs., Mrs. Louise Friedbrock. And, by the way, I am old enough to have been given an IQ exam and my score was 124."

Chuckling, Reese answered, "Thank you, Mrs. Friedbrock. As I said, an excellent question. It is not the beliefs, in and of themselves, which cause the secular to react as they do. They have demonstrated an immense capacity for tolerance and, in fact, tolerance is nearly a mantra of the secular. Everything is to be tolerated, from extreme lifestyles to bizarre paint colors on the exteriors of their homes. They expect everyone to tolerate terrorists who kill three thousand Americans, and they expect all of us to take the time to understand what we have done in the past which would drive these people to such extreme acts. We are supposed to tolerate

serial killers and rapists and understand that they had no choice in their actions because of their upbringing. In fact, tolerance is to be applied to all things except religion and, of course, obese people and smokers.

"So, they certainly should have no problem tolerating the religious, except for one issue: the common theme among all of the issues and things to be tolerated is a removal of limitations. The reason religion is intolerable is that it is intolerant; it is also judgmental; it follows an inflexible set of rules; it creates morality without regard for the existence of a scientific explanation or justification for the rules. Religion doesn't care whether it can be proved empirically that having sex with a six-year-old is wrong. Science has a long history of finding support for every side of an issue. Religion, on the other hand, does not care whether studies have shown that polygamy may be biologically or socially superior to monogamy. Rules are not situational for religion. Although it can be proved that lying is more advantageous than telling the truth, religion says it is a sin to lie. In short, morality is not relative; it is not subject to study and interpretation; it cannot be challenged, even by what may appear to be 'facts.' Morality simply…is.

"I am not saying the religious are perfect. I know there are many of you who can cite countless examples of so-called religious individuals who have committed heinous acts. You can also cite numerous cases in which some of the major institutions of religion have performed horrible deeds – sometimes in the very name of their faith. No, it is not that they are perfect or claim to be. It would be far too easy to explain the animosity were that to be the case. Most people dislike anyone who is perfect, and we all hate anyone who claims to be and is not. The problem is…the religious are not imperfect enough. They continue to struggle against the base instincts of greed and self-gratification, frequently slipping their morality into our legal system. They have created an environment where if we transgress, we not only have to answer to God, we also have to answer to the local magistrate. If the religious would only give in to the very instincts within them that they fight to oppose, they, too, could be embraced by the secular.

"I may appear to contradict myself. It was, after all, the nonreligious who were the most vocal when the spectacular indiscretions of prominent evangelists were revealed. It was also the nonreligious who most harshly

criticized the priests for having sex with young boys in their congregations. However, I suggest that their words expressed not moral outrage but vindication of their own beliefs.

"If you are seriously considering this argument at all, you might be wondering what the mechanism is which has created this conflict. It has actually been fairly well explained and predicted by Abraham Maslow and his thoughts on the hierarchy of needs. That book, as you will notice on your class syllabus, is your first required reading for this course. The basic concept is that when mankind lived in a primitive environment without the benefit of a tremendous infrastructure to provide food and security, we were all-consumed with survival. Finding and preparing the next meal dominated our thoughts. Ensuring that we and our biological offspring were safe from attack, by beast or human, was also paramount in our thoughts. Please take a moment to visualize a life such as this. As societies developed and infrastructures were created to provide for a steady supply of food, and as cooperative groups formed to establish armies to protect the group, these basic needs diminished in importance.

"Religions flourished during this time, by the way, because men and women were suddenly thrust into tightly knit groups, providing both a need and a medium for religion. Without religion, there existed both a moral relativism and a brutal Darwinian natural selection process. Might made right. If you could clobber your neighbor, then his hut, store of food, wife, and children were yours for the taking. This activity was obviously not conducive to the maintenance of a stable society. Religion conveyed to the people the message that this was bad. It not only explained that clobbering your neighbor would get you sent to hell for eternity, but it also established a social construct where your bad behavior was condemned by your peers. And if your behavior was bad enough, you were cast out of the village, losing access to the steady supply of food and the protection of the army.

"Scientists, i.e., secularists, insist that the necessary rules for a functioning society are logical and inevitable, and that the natural, biological urge to survive and reproduce will result in the same basic set of rules promulgated by the religious. In fact, this is not the case. With mankind, there are glaring examples of the collapse of societies which have

rejected religion, even though they already possessed the benefit of the knowledge and sophistication of the centuries. The most extreme example would be the communist Soviet Republic, where religion was banned.

"Returning to Mr. Maslow…after the basic survival needs were met, people were less preoccupied with them, eventually taking them for granted. At that point, we were able to express a need for art and music and, eventually, literature. Again, under the guiding hand of the religious, the civilized world experienced the Renaissance. There was virtually a flood of beautiful art, magnificent symphonies, and breathtakingly exquisite poetry and books. All of these were ravenously consumed by eager multitudes who had reached this level in the hierarchy.

"But the production of great art, music, and literature is time-consuming, as is its distribution. Operas and symphonies were performed at great halls. Paintings only existed with each being one of a kind, displayed in galleries. Books were tediously copied by hand. As the population grew and the need intensified, the technology to deliver art developed to the level of photography, movies, television, radio, and mass-produced books. I'm certain it can be argued that as the ability to distribute all of the forms of art accelerated, the quality of the output diminished. *Laverne and Shirley* was hardly on par with *Macbeth*. But as society raced to quench each thirst, the masses moved up another notch on Maslow's ladder.

"We now have all of the great art of the world at our fingertips. The books can be read on a screen or printed at home, as can the images of the paintings hanging in some distant gallery. The music is downloaded onto MP3 players. Our cell phones will play *Macbeth* or the latest Adam Sandler movie. We have achieved a degree of gratification on this level verging on the absolute. And, in case you didn't notice, somewhere in the rapid evolution of this distribution network, the religious lost control. What started out during the Renaissance as absolute control devolved into a legalistic, de facto control. The movie studios had censors, as did the television networks. The music industry had the FCC to satisfy. The book and magazine publishers wished they had a single authority in their loop. They were forced to meet 'local community standards,' which ran the gamut from extremely conservative to relatively moderate. The common

thread among all of these choke points was religion. There has never been a scientific study successfully defining pornography. The Supreme Court struggled with the concept for years, finally settling upon dumping it back to the local community. Obscenity or pornography cannot be defined in any rational, logical way. Thus, for a long time it fell to the religious who couldn't define it either, but definitely knew it when they saw it. Unfortunately, the sands of society gradually shifted out from under the feet of the censors.

"Now, here is the pivotal issue. We have arguably reached a satiation point on this particular level of Maslow's hierarchy. If so, what is next? What will the next need be? Or the next set of needs? The critical aspect of the hierarchy not mentioned earlier is that our urge to satisfy our current need, whatever it may be, is as intense and all-consuming as was our need to feed ourselves, our need to protect our family, our need to survive. What will be the unfulfilled desire which is subjected to the intense spotlight of our collective hunger?

"With the diminution of influence and control over the 'arts' of the pop culture, we have already seen the effect. In my lifetime I have seen married couples depicted on television who were not allowed to sleep in one bed. It was the rule. Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore had twin beds. Today I can stop at a red light while driving my daughter to school and hear a song, broadcast on public airwaves, which celebrates the beating and raping of a girl.

"The stage is set. We have created a network of computers with access to the Internet, television with access to hundreds of channels, cell phones with these capacities plus more. We have reached a satiated 'need level,' and the governor has fallen off the carburetor. We have billions of people on this planet who have demonstrated an ability to 'get it done' whatever 'it' is. We are truly at a crossroads. We can choose to plunge deeper into the abyss or we can, with some help, choose our next level wisely.

"First of all, I'm not a prude, recognizing that denial has become a cliché among public speakers. But I wanted to say it anyway because it is true. This course is not going to be a litany of all of the horrible symptoms in society which have caused me to come to the conclusion that we are all

going to hell in a hand basket. That's not the point. And, as much as I've taken pot shots at the scientific method, I do plan on discussing, as objectively as possible, some fundamental 'cause and effect' scenarios. I don't care which side of this issue you may be on; if you are intellectually honest, I believe you will see that the presence of religion throughout our history resulted in 'A' occurring, and since its diminishment during the twentieth century, 'B' has occurred."

Reese studied the faces of the class. Gone were the angry, clenched looks. Even Megan Mislin was sitting on the front half of her seat, her pen gripped and hovering over a forgotten notepad.

"We are not talking about simple hedonism. This is not an issue of pleasure and gratification. The fundamental oppositional forces between religion and human nature have been utter and absolute selfishness, and the concept that there is an undeniable 'someone' who is above you. If you believe there is a God and God is your creator and your judge, it cannot help but temper your selfishness…your narcissism. Without the existence of God, there can be no authority higher than you. No king, no president, no dictator can truly control you…can truly lead you. If you are convinced you are intelligent enough, you will believe you can outwit societal authority, successfully conceal the most despicable of acts, and make each and every decision based solely upon how it affects you.

"That is the reason for the secular wish to eradicate religion. If religion is gone, God is gone. If God is gone, the position is open."

Chapter Two

Stu Carroll leaned back in his chair, balancing on the rear legs, his heels propped on the table. A line of more than fifty students waited patiently as he talked with the first. Reese Johnson was leaning against the wall, reading text messages, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he recognized Dexter Mills, his department head. Mills was standing next to a breathtakingly beautiful woman with golden hair and a brilliant smile. "Great lecture, Reese. Welcome aboard." Mills was extending his hand, which Reese took in a firm handshake.

"You say that now. Wait until it hits the fan tonight on the TV news."

"There wasn't a thing you said that the University can have a problem with."

Chuckling ruefully, Reese replied, "Oh, it won't be what I said. It'll be what they thought I said. It'll be how they remember it. I've been through this, remember?"

"That's why I was here, to hear it myself. That's why we taped it," Mills said, pointing to the video crew.

"Okay…let's hope. So, you liked it?"

"Liked it? I loved it." He leaned forward and said in a mock whisper, "And so did Freddy." Freddy was the "not in his presence," informal name for the president of the University.

"He was here?"

"Back row. Called me on my cell, just before I walked over, to tell me I was right and you were a good choice."

Reese relaxed. It was good to know, at least so far, he had the support and even praise from the administration. It would be important in the weeks ahead as the other faculty ganged up.

"Well, I just hope it lasts."

"It will, my friend. I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Nicole. Nicole, this is Reese Johnson."

She extended her hand. "A pleasure, Reese. Dexter has told me so much about you."

Reese could not help but notice her flawless complexion, accented by the subtle application of obviously expensive makeup. Her grip was gentle and soft. She was the type of woman who would cause Reese's wife, if she were present, to insert herself between Reese and Nicole immediately.

"The pleasure is mine."

Nicole began to respond, when Stu appeared next to them. "Professor Johnson, there are two gentlemen here to see you. They say it's important."

"Stu, please, not now. Set an appointment for them."

Sheepishly, Stu said, "No. I think you should take a look at who they are before we try that," handing Reese two business cards. His eyes went straight to the FBI logo, scanning next to the title. One of the two waiting was the bureau chief from Phoenix.

"What's up?" Mills asked. Reese handed Dexter the cards and told Stu to bring them over.

"FBI? What the heck is this about?"

"I have no clue, my friend. No clue at all."

Reese looked over as the two men walked toward him. He could not help but think of the movie *Men in Black*. The older one, who walked with a limp, was probably the bureau chief. He had the old-fashioned, J. Edgar Hoover FBI look with an expressionless face, neatly trimmed sandy brown hair, a sharp nose, and a well-defined chin. The younger agent, a black man, looked more like Denzel Washington than Will Smith, and actually smiled at Reese as they approached.

"Professor Johnson, I'm Special Agent Reynolds, this is Agent Powell."

"Pleased to meet you. This is Professor Dexter Mills, our department head, and his wife, Nicole."

Reynolds nodded to Mills and his wife. "Sir, ma'am. Professor Johnson, may we speak with you in private for a few minutes?"

"Of course. Dexter, I'm terribly sorry…."

"No," Mills said, springing into action a bit too hastily, and pulling out a large set of keys. "Here, I'll open this office for you." He turned and unlocked a door to a small office just off the lecture hall.

"Thank you, Dexter."

“No problem. Uh, call me later.”

“Thank you, Professor Mills,” said the FBI agent.

The three filed into the room. Agent Powell closed the door behind them. After they were all seated, Reese spoke first. “What is it you need?”

“Professor Johnson, we’ve been sent by our D.C. office to escort you to a meeting.”

“Special Agent Reynolds, I’m sure from my past experiences with the FBI that there is no point in my asking you to call me Reese.”

With no change in inflection, Reynolds answered, “No, sir, there isn’t.”

“Very well. By ‘escort,’ do you mean I don’t have a choice?”

“No, sir. Not at all. We have been told to make it perfectly clear to you that you may accompany us or not, at your own choosing.”

“Can you tell me why I am needed for this meeting?”

“I’m afraid they have told me very little. It is my understanding your particular field of expertise is…I believe the words used were…desperately needed to resolve an extremely sensitive matter.”

“I’m flattered. My field of expertise is religion; I’m not sure how that would come in handy in the Situation Room.”

Agent Powell finally spoke. “So, you’re a theologian?”

Reese caught the quick glance Reynolds gave to Powell, obviously silently chiding him for jumping into the conversation. “No. Actually my degrees are in psychology and anthropology. The combination of the two seemed a natural for the study of religion and its impact on society. But I’m still not clear why you would need someone there with my specialty.”

“As I said, I haven’t been fully briefed on this. I have been authorized to tell you that this is a meeting you would not want to miss. I can also tell you that you’re needed to help us authenticate a person.”

“Special Agent Reynolds, I’m sure you read up on me a little before this meeting, so you know I’ve had some rather extensive dealings with your organization. I know for certain that a bureau chief, particularly from a bureau as significant at yours, would not be kept in the dark. I am a patriotic person, as well as an all-around good guy, but I am not going to hop on a jet with the two of you and fly off to Washington, D.C. based upon these

vagaries. Who is it I am supposed to authenticate, and why is it so damned important?"

Reynolds sighed, closing his eyes as he did so, almost as if he were bracing himself for something very unpleasant. "You're correct, Professor Johnson; I have been briefed. We were attempting to obtain your presence in Washington without answering your question, to avoid jeopardizing your objectivity. If you are telling me you will not come with us without that information, I have been authorized to disclose it."

"Yes, Special Agent Reynolds, that is what I am saying."

"In that case, your second question as to the reason for its importance will be answered by our answer to your first question. The person, whom you have been asked to authenticate, claims to be…God."

Reese stared silently at the agent. It felt absurd to him to ask Reynolds to repeat what he had said. It had been spoken clearly and distinctly. The FBI did not send bureau chiefs out on practical jokes. Reese stood up and walked to the office door, opening it. Leaning out, he saw that Stu was still dealing with the line of students. "Stu, could you join us for a moment?"

Special Agent Reynolds spoke up. "Professor, I don't recommend bringing your assistant into this matter."

Sounding more curt than he preferred, Reese answered, "That isn't my intent."

Stu Carroll reached the doorway.

"Stu, I need you to break away from what you're doing for a couple of minutes. Go to my office and look up the phone number for the FBI bureau office in Phoenix."

"I still have his card."

"Use the phone book. Call the office and ask to speak to the assistant bureau chief and make sure you obtain his name. When you get him on the phone, ask him for the name of his immediate supervisor. If it's Special Agent Reynolds, ask him to fax a photograph of Reynolds to us."

"Wouldn't you rather have him e-mail the picture?"

"No, I would not. At that point, ask him where Special Agent Reynolds is supposed to be right now."

Stu looked both intrigued and confused. “How do I know I’ll get the assistant on the phone?”

“Just identify yourself and tell them you are Professor Reese Johnson’s assistant. If that doesn’t work, hang up, and let me know.”

Stu nodded and left, obviously consumed with curiosity. Reese walked back to the chair, noticing Reynolds flipping open his cell phone.

“I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t do that.” Reynolds paused, snapping the phone back into the closed position with a muted click.

“I was going to make sure….”

“I know you were going to make sure everything went smoothly. Let’s just say I’ll be more convinced if Stu is able to get your number-two man….”

“Woman.”

“Whatever, woman, on the phone without your help.”

Reynolds smiled for the first time. “The fax is a nice touch.”

“Internet rerouting and intercepts are a little too easy. People are focusing on playing games with Internet technology. They’ve pretty much left fax machines behind. Anyway, while we have some time, I have a few questions.”

“I’m sure you do. Unfortunately, what I’ve already told you is, substantially, the extent of my briefing.”

“Have you met this person?”

“No. This has been a strictly D.C. operation.”

“How did you come across him?”

“He came to us. Walked into the Hoover Building and asked to speak to the Director.”

“That’s odd. I would have thought that he was someone your people had picked up running some sort of a scam. So, he walked up to the front desk, asked to speak to the Director, and when asked his name, he just said ‘God’?”

“Not exactly.” A cloud passed over Reynolds’ face for a moment. “This part is a little sketchy. Apparently he asked the front desk to relay a name – I don’t know what name it was – and very politely asked the receptionist to

make sure the Director was personally given this name. When she asked the nature of the visit, he asked her to convey that it was personal. Whatever name he gave did the trick."

"So they waltzed him right into the Director's office?"

"Not exactly. Two agents were sent down to check him for weapons and bombs. He was fingerprinted, with no match on file. Face recognition came up with nothing. We've taken a DNA sample, and we're waiting to see if we get a 'hit' on that. In the interim, he has been placed in a VIP interrogation room."

"I've seen those rooms."

"That's right. The Director did speak with him, as did two others."

"Two others?"

Reynolds was beginning to look uncomfortable. "Again, I'm a little sketchy on this, but I believe the others were from the Bureau."

Reese contemplated all of this for a moment. Instead of providing answers, the facts were just creating questions, geometrically. He would obviously not get the answers from Reynolds.

"Professor, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all, but look, we're going to try this again. Perhaps with more leverage I can now accomplish it. My name is Reese. If you want me to go with you to D.C., that is what you will call me from this moment forward."

Allowing the slight smile again, Special Agent Reynolds answered, "Reese, it is."

"And what might be the diminutive of Special Agent Reynolds?"

Still smiling, he answered, "Nicholas."

"Good. We are making excellent progress. And does anyone not in immediate danger of being pistol-whipped ever call you Nick?"

"Only my stepson," answered Reynolds, the smile suddenly leaving his face.

Saddened by this brief glimpse into his personal realm, Reese continued, "Nicholas, it is. Please, your question."

"Your lecture really resonated with me."

“Thank you.” Reese was surprised. He expected the question to be about the mysterious visitor.

“In my position, I’ve had the opportunity, actually somewhat a front row seat, to observe a lot of what you were describing. I’ve been with the agency for twenty-eight years and firmly believe things are getting worse, even though the statistics say otherwise. But until today, I’ve never been able to put my finger on exactly what I felt was happening. I remember when I first joined the agency, the old timers talked about the glory days of Capone. There was so much crime, and it was so visible. But it was, for lack of a better word, basic crime. It was greed-motivated crime. And the Bureau improved its techniques to fight that type of crime until our system became almost an art form. Since then we’ve enjoyed a fairly steady reduction in almost all of the crime rates we measure. It wasn’t until listening to your lecture that I realized what happened. It wasn’t what we did. That tier in the hierarchy simply became satisfied, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Reese answered. “Society progressed. Yesterday’s rumrunners became today’s dot-com millionaires. No reason to break the law if there’s a legal way to satisfy the need.”

“It makes sense. What has happened since then has become ugly. Ugly and strange. Our old techniques for finding and prosecuting the bad guys seem as outdated as…as using a horse and buggy to enforce the speed limits on the freeways.”

“When the mob families evolved from Prohibition days into the drug trade and white-collar crime, we were able to follow them through the transition. The motives were still the same, and in many ways the techniques were still the same. Our bad guys today are different. It might be some lone computer geek who wants to hack into the air traffic control system, just to watch planes fall out of the sky. It could be a third-year biology student planning on pumping some home-grown anthrax into the air conditioning system at Logan Airport, just to see how people die. Plus, there are the so-called terrorists who kill three thousand people with nothing but box cutters and an understanding of our public transportation system.”

Reese was curious. “Why did you say ‘so-called’?”

“Because so many of them were joy-killers before Al-Queda found them, or before they found Al-Queda. We’ve spent a lot of time profiling the survivors, as well as the crop at Gitmo. Checking their backgrounds, talking to their families, friends, and classmates, we discovered they, for the most part, were not ‘nice’ people who were somehow sucked into a Jihad mentality. They were torturing pets and pulling the wings off flies when they were happy, affluent, well-adjusted six-year-olds. Reese, could you have imagined or predicted what happened at Columbine beforehand?”

“I did.”

Reynolds hesitated.

“My first book. I guess you skipped that when you were briefed on me. The concept of satisfaction of needs, as described by Maslow, was quite reassuring. He believed that as we created a society which removed the need to worry about the basics, we would transcend into an appreciation of the arts, as I mentioned in my lecture. He did not fully contemplate a satiation of needs for that level. You have to admit it is a little hard to visualize. However, he believed the next step on the ladder would be a turning within, or self-actualizing, and we would become a more intellectual being, a more philosophical being. It was an almost utopian vision and quite surprising coming from someone trained in psychology, for it showed a serious lack of understanding of human nature.

“He was, however, partially right. As the individual members of mankind feel they have satisfied the second step on the ladder, they do turn within. For a small percentage of the population, this has resulted in a blossoming of philosophical thought. For many others, it has caused an almost obsessive quest for answers. The New Age movement has sprung into existence, offering theories from the quite reasonable and scientifically feasible to the outlandish and absurd. The third group to have reached satiation and turned within has found the primal beast that lives within all of us. Through all of our years of evolution and civilization, we have never eradicated the animal part of our makeup; we have only contained it. Focusing on the primal beast causes an intense hedonism whether it is sexual satisfaction, in all of its normal and deviant forms, or competitiveness to the degree of recklessness – witness the so-called

extreme sports – or acquisitiveness to an astounding level, with CEOs and sports or entertainment figures making more money than can reasonably be spent in ten lifetimes. Unfortunately, these three categories, in my opinion, only comprise somewhere between twenty and thirty-five percent of the population."

"And the rest? What do they find when they look inside themselves?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes, nothing. They see no intrinsic value, no reason for existence. They look inside and see an empty shell. And, extending that outward, if they have no value, neither does anyone or anything which people have created. All of the physical trappings of civilization look like a false construct. All of our institutions appear, to them, as complex diversions and distractions. All of our rules are meaningless. Life is nothing but an elaborate role-playing game with no end and no possible victory. The sociologists have it wrong: kids aren't emulating Internet role-playing games; the games are an artistic depiction of this group's view of reality. In fact, these games have probably been created and are so obsessively played as an attempt by those with some vestige of a conscience to confine their anti-social behavior to a harmless environment."

"An outlet?"

"Yes, Nicholas, an outlet which, for a time, keeps the participants from performing those acts upon the general public."

"Until the game no longer satisfies the need."

"Precisely. And we can glean clues from observing the games. They all share some common themes. The players can 'take out' anyone they want, at any time. It isn't driven by hatred, envy, or greed; it's just the elimination of one more player. The players remain anonymous. They build whatever they want and tear down whatever they want; after all, it's just 'virtual' anyway. Finally, and of the most importance, the surest way for any of the games to lose their players is to impose some rules. Even the slightest hint of a limitation causes the participants to leave in droves, to quickly find another game without any restraints."

There was a knock at the door. "Yes?"

Stu entered, carrying a single sheet of paper. “Boy, you were right, Professor. Your name worked like a charm.” He handed the sheet to Reese, who glanced at it only briefly. The faxed picture was obviously Special Agent Reynolds.

“Well, I guess I’d better pack some things.”

After giving a vague explanation to Dexter, the three men walked across the grassy mall to the faculty parking area, where Reynolds and Powell had also parked. It was a hot August afternoon in Tucson, and Reese saw his first mirage in the distance. Turning to Reynolds as they walked, he asked, “Do you ever get used to this heat?”

“No.”

They continued walking in silence. Rounding the corner of the Student Union building, Reese caught a glimpse of a man standing near his car. Reynolds immediately saw him as well, and asked, “Is that a faculty member or friend?”

“Not a friend, and I haven’t been here long enough to meet many of the faculty.”

Walking three abreast with the two FBI agents flanking Reese, they reached his Ford F-150. The stranger, a slender man with a reddish beard and round John Lennon glasses, stepped toward Reese. “Professor Johnson? Could I talk to you for a minute?”

Reese started to answer, when Reynolds spoke up. “I’m sorry. The professor doesn’t have time right now.”

Clearly irritated, the man fired back, “You need to stop this!”

Curious, Reese asked, “Stop what?”

“Stop this whoring for the church! Stop lending them the credibility of your science, your university.”

Having heard this all before, Johnson did not bother to respond. Instead, attempting to step around the man, he found himself within inches of the bearded face. The stranger, reaching up to grab the front of Reese’s shirt, was quick, but not quite quick enough. In what was almost a blur, Reynolds and Powell grabbed the stranger by his arms, nearly lifting him off the ground, spinning him, and slamming him into the side of the pickup.

Looking over his shoulder at Reese, Powell said, “Professor, please step back a bit.” Reese complied.

Reynolds kept the fanatic at bay while Powell patted him down, finding nothing that could be used as a weapon. He then turned the stranger around so his back was against the front fender, making sure his own body was directly interposed between the stranger and Reese. Reynolds reached for his wallet and showed it to the man, verbally identifying himself as well. The stranger’s eyes widened, but he remained silent. Reynolds asked, “What is your name, sir?” The man did not answer; he just stared defiantly at the agent. Sighing, Reynolds again turned the stranger around to face the truck, reaching into the back pocket of the worn and faded jeans to extract a wallet.

Turning him back around, Reynolds said, “Mr. Sheffield, are you a student at this university?” Sheffield continued to remain silent. Reynolds explained, “Look, Mr. Sheffield, it’s actually fairly simple. If you answer our questions, you will probably walk away from this parking lot on your own. If you don’t, you will definitely ride out of this parking lot in the back of a police car. It’s up to you.”

“No, I’m not a student.”

“Why are you here?”

“To stop Reese Johnson from continuing to poison the minds of our youth.”

“And how is he doing that?”

“With his hate speech.”

“Hate speech?”

“Yes! There are already too many people who hate gays and lesbians, blacks, atheists! He is goading them on, giving them support!”

“Mr. Sheffield, how were you planning to stop him?”

It was obvious from the fleeting expression on the man’s face that he had not mentally progressed that far. “Talk to him. Convince him that hate is not a family value.”

Rolling his eyes, Reynolds asked, “Just talk to him?”

“Yeah!”

“Professor Johnson,” Reynolds said over his shoulder. “Do you have any desire to press charges against this gentleman?”

“No, Nicholas, I do not.”

Turning back to Sheffield, Reynolds moved even closer until their noses nearly touched. “Mr. Sheffield, you are free to go. Please walk around the front of this vehicle and then head east. Do not pause until you are out of sight, and keep your hands in plain view for us.”

“But he’s got to be stopped. Don’t you understand?”

“I do understand, Mr. Sheffield. You will have a chance to talk to the professor some other time. Right now, he has to leave. So please be going.”

Sheffield was excited. Spittle dripped onto his plaid shirt. But he was rational enough to realize this discussion was over. Standing on his toes and looking over Reynolds’ shoulder, he yelled, “I’ll be back!” Panting, he turned to his right and walked around the front of the pickup, turning east.

Reynolds watched until Sheffield rounded the corner of the building. Then, turning to Reese, he said, “I think you need to ride with me. Powell can drive your truck.”

Reese started to argue, thought better of it, and tossed his keys to the other agent.

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Reynolds was quiet, navigating the narrow campus streets, until he reached Campbell Avenue.

“Turn north.”

“I know.”

“Of course you do.”

“Reese, what do you make of that guy?”

“I’ve seen a million of them. They’re all like ‘Chatty Cathy.’”

“Pull the string?”

“Yeah, and the same phrases come out.”

“Do you ever try to talk to them?”

“At first I did. It’s a waste of time. If you ask them to explain the reasoning for their position, they can’t. If you try to counter their buzz phrases with facts, they start calling you a racist, a homophobe, whatever. It gets old.”

They did not speak during the rest of the trip. It was not until Reynolds pulled into the driveway leading to Reese’s new home that Reese spoke. “I don’t see any reason not to tell my wife.”

“Neither do I.”

Taken aback, Reese said, “That’s surprising. You guys always want everything kept quiet.”

“Would you if I asked you to?”

“Nope.”

Grinning, Reynolds muttered, “There you go.”

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Reese and his wife, Claire, rode in the back seat of the Expedition. Reynolds was in front with Agent Powell. Reynolds was again driving.

Claire asked nonchalantly, “So, Agent Powell, how long have you been with the FBI?”

“Five years, ma’am.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Actually, ma’am, I love it.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s the people mostly. I meet some pretty nasty ones; they’re not the ones I’m talking about. But the people I work with are great. And the people I get a chance to help are incredible.”

As Claire chatted with Powell, Reese stared out the window, thinking about how the conversation had gone when he arrived home. Claire was amazing, he thought to himself. He could walk in the door with two FBI agents and tell her he had to fly to Washington, D.C. to meet with God, and her first question was, “Can I come along?” Nicholas was less than happy about this turn of events but did not really have a choice. As they packed,

Reese explained everything he knew so far. She just took it all in without saying much. Finally, as she zipped her suitcase shut, Claire came around the bed, gripped Reese's face with both hands, kissed him, and said, "I am so proud of you. They need someone to verify that they are really talking to God, and they pick you." Reese just blushed.

They had taken River Road east to Craycroft, then turned south, obviously heading toward Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. Claire and Powell wound down their conversation as Reynolds paused at the gate. Sliding down the window, Reynolds opened his ID and handed it to the sergeant, suggesting he call his CO. The sergeant pointed to a parking spot just inside the gate and reached for the phone while Reynolds pulled forward. The phone call took no more than two minutes. The guard walked briskly to the driver's window of the Expedition, returning Reynolds' ID, and saluted with an exaggerated flourish.

No one noticed the white Prius which had parked just outside the gate as they had arrived. No one noticed the slight build of the driver, the thick red beard, the round John Lennon glasses. After Reynolds was cleared, the Prius backed out of the space, made a U-turn and drove north on Craycroft.

Chapter Three

"You've got to be kidding?" Reese exclaimed, staring through the one-way mirror at the subject of his trip. "Did someone get this guy out of Central Casting?"

Craig McWilliams, the head of the D.C. profiling group, agreed, "It's weird, all right."

Sitting at the table on the other side of the mirror, sipping a glass of orange juice, was the most "perfect" God Reese had ever seen. With thick, wavy white hair, slightly long, a flowing white beard to match, intense blue eyes shadowed by thick but not unruly eyebrows, the man was neither slender nor heavyset. "At least he isn't wearing a white robe," said Reese sarcastically. He was, actually, wearing a white, long-sleeved oxford shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, no tie, brown dress slacks, and brown loafers. He looked like a recently retired symphony conductor on a trip to see the Lincoln Memorial.

Reese addressed McWilliams, "Have you been talking to him?"

"Actually, quite a bit."

"Well?"

"Professor Johnson…."

"Reese."

"Reese, we've all agreed not to share anything with you at this time, at least before your first interview. We want you to go in with a fresh mind."

Turning to face the profiler, Reese said, "So, he has already convinced all of you?"

Quickly turning his face away from Johnson in an attempt to give nothing more away, McWilliams just shrugged. Reese turned his attention back to the glass. "This man could have been the model for Michelangelo." Again, McWilliams said nothing. "Well, no time like the present." Sidestepping to the door, Reese turned the handle and walked into the interrogation room. He was immediately struck with the warmth of the room. It was not the kind of warmth which tempted Reese to turn down the thermostat, but rather, as he would later describe, it was "the kind of

warmth you feel when walking into your grandmother's living room in the dead of winter, and the fireplace is blazing."

The man at the table was already facing the doorway as Reese came into the room. Reese noticed a presence around the stranger which was more powerful than any he had ever felt. 'Okay,' Reese thought to himself, 'the guy is charismatic. Let's not fall overboard.' The stranger's blue eyes were locked on Reese's, a slight smile crinkling the corners. 'At least not yet,' he thought further.

"Good afternoon, my name is…."

"Doctor Reese Johnson, I know. Delighted to meet you, sir."

The stranger's voice reminded Reese of a time he had nearly forgotten. As a small boy, he had devoted himself to the Catholic Church, even becoming an altar boy. His favorite time was during the mass when he was not taking part in the service. He would climb into the loft and sit on the floor with his back against the wall separating the organ pipes from the choir chamber. When the organist would play the lower octaves, the mahogany wall would resonate and the vibration would send shivers up his spine. Reese was glad he was wearing a suit jacket because he could feel his arms break out in gooseflesh.

"I am delighted as well, sir. Your name?"

"Elohim."

"A beautiful name. Are you Jewish?"

"Pardon my curiosity, but why do you ask?"

"I believe that Elohim has a Hebrew origin."

"Dr. Johnson, I enjoy a spirited conversation as much as, well…very much. But, please, sir, do not pretend to know not that which you possess. To answer your question, in a manner of speaking, yes, I am a Jew."

Reese had learned well that a primary mistake with the charismatic was to resist them. It was the act of and the process of resisting which gave them power over you. He gazed directly into the blue eyes of Elohim, allowing himself to be sucked into a vortex of emotions, all pleasant, all comforting. Time passed. Perhaps seconds, minutes, or even hours slipped past. The experience was not an emotional or intellectual surrender; Reese was conscious and thinking the entire time. He did not feel trapped. Instead, it

was like comfortably resting on a large down pillow while not being particularly tired. He felt able to remove himself at any time, at his own whim.

Doing so, he returned to the present moment. “I understand that you have told these people you are God?”

“Not precisely, Dr. Johnson. I have told them that I am the Creator.”

“The Creator?”

“Yes.”

“The creator of…?”

“The universe, as they know it.”

“As they know it? That sounds like a hedge.”

Elohim chuckled, a deep-throated chuckle. “You are listening, aren’t you? Yes, it is a hedge. I promise you I will always tell you the truth. Sometimes, when speaking truthfully, one reaches a fork in the road. The first path is a hedge. The other is a digression which would take far too long and possibly not be understood. I assure you I will return to the topic of the universe ‘as they know it’ in a conversation with you in the near future.”

“I understand, Elohim. But let me ask you this. My universe includes Earth, our solar system, our galaxy, and all of the stars and galaxies mankind has ever viewed. Is that the universe you have created?”

Elohim paused a moment. During that moment Reese noticed his blue eyes dulled, only slightly, immediately brightening again. “Yes. That is the universe I have created.”

“And you created mankind?”

“Yes.”

“And all of the plants and animals and bacteria which live upon the Earth?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do this all at once?”

“By ‘all at once,’ you mean…?”

“Did you wave your hand and say ‘abracadabra’ and it all sprang into existence?”

“Oh, no. It took some time.”

"How much time?"

"Six days. My friend, you already know that."

Reese felt he was a ball of yarn, being batted about by a playful kitten. As Reese focused on his own thoughts and struggled to retain some level of concentration, Elohim smiled. "My dear Dr. Johnson, you are uncomfortable."

"I'm not sure *uncomfortable* is the right word."

"Of course it is not. The right word would be *frustrated*." He paused for a response and received none. Reese, unsure of what to say, said nothing.

"You have spent most of your lifetime cutting to the quick, boring through the extraneous, and disregarding the distractions to which most others fall victim. Your mind is quite adept at separating the wheat from the chaff. You are frustrated because, at each time you have needed to do this, the path has been clear and well lit within your mind. You are mostly a stranger to unsureness and doubt. For some reason, today, at this moment, in this room, the path within your mind is not clear." The old man stared at Reese, not looking for confirmation as he obviously had no doubt he was correct, but gazing with a deep compassion. If this was a game to him, Reese thought, he did not appear to be enjoying it.

"Let me make a suggestion. Do what you always do. Trust in yourself. Just ask the question which is within you."

"Yes, Obi-Wan."

Immediately Elohim's face rearranged from concern and compassion to surprise and delight. As he leaned back, a full-throated laughter erupted, filling the room. Reese did not join in the laughter, waiting until it subsided. When it did, he asked, "How can you laugh?"

Leaning forward, Elohim said, "It is a mechanism shared by all, but that isn't what you mean, is it?"

"No. To find something amusing, one must be surprised, one must not see it coming. That is hardly a trait of our Creator."

"No. That is hardly a trait of your God. That is why when you asked if I had represented myself as God, I said I had not. Mankind's definition of God has become…inaccurate. I truly love you and wish to be close to you. There cannot be a close, reciprocated relationship without surprise. Could

you have a loving relationship with your wife if you knew her every thought? If you knew what she was to do before she did? If there could be no spontaneity? If she could never make you laugh?"

Elohim paused, making a decision. "Reese, you are a parent. Although you believe in unconditional love, you also judge your children, sometimes consciously, occasionally unconsciously. As their parent, along with your wife, you contributed all of the genes which made them who they are. You have taught them and influenced them in countless ways. And yet you judge them. If who they are and what they become is predetermined by you, how can they be judged?"

"So you judge us?"

"Of course."

"For what purpose?"

"What purpose does a parent have for judging children? Is it to decide how much love to dispense? Of course not. Is it to decide how much to leave them in your will? Possibly, for some parents. No, a father's and a mother's reason for judging is to decide trust and readiness. You judge your children before you trust them with their first bicycle, BB gun, or automobile. Not to do so would be irresponsible. A good parent would not automatically hand the keys over to a son or daughter just because it was his or her sixteenth birthday. A good parent would have to be convinced the child was ready. You need to judge children before you can decide to trust their word.

"When children are ready to leave the nest, the parent no longer has control over whether they go, or what they do once gone. However, it doesn't stop you from continuing to decide if they were ready. Why? It is that judgment which tells you, as they spread their wings, whether you can sit back and enjoy their flight, taking satisfaction in the individuals they have become, or if you need to remain vigilant, running beneath them with your arms outstretched so you may catch them when they fall.

"It is natural to judge…for me…for you…for everyone. There is another reason, as well. If people are not judged, if there is no standard against which they are measured, they, to put it mildly, do not do well. Left

to their own devices, so to speak, they measure all their choices against the only yardstick available."

"Themselves."

"Exactly. And you, Dr. Johnson, more than most, already understand this. It has been one of the primary tenets of your philosophy, which was why I was so pleased when it was you chosen for this…meeting."

"Have you studied my work?"

"Oh, yes. Quite thoroughly." Elohim paused for a moment and then added wryly, "As you have studied mine."

It was Reese's turn to laugh. After a moment, he asked, "So you have lived among us?"

"I promised I would only speak the truth and not mislead you. There is no perfectly candid way to answer that question without explaining some things for which you are not yet ready. So, please allow me to be vague and only say that I have always been here, in a sense."

Turning in his chair and facing the wall, Reese collected his thoughts for a moment. There were so many directions to take this interview that he was briefly bewildered. Elohim was right earlier. Doubt was rarely an impediment for him. Reese had always trusted his gut, and not only the next step to take but the many which needed to follow were always obvious. This interview was different. It was not that Elohim had convinced him he was God, or rather the Creator, but it was that Reese was beginning to hope that he would.

"Elohim, you appear to know several details of my life. If all the things we do and say and think are not preordained, then how do you know so much about each of us?"

"That is simple, my friend. From the moment the word is spoken, the deed is done, or the idea is thought, it is, metaphorically at least, written."

"The Akashic Records?"

"There are scholars here who have given the concept that name. For the purpose of this conversation, it will suffice."

Reese, again, paused. He continued to be unsure as to which direction to take. As Reese thought, Elohim waited patiently.

At last, Reese asked, "Can you perform miracles?"

“I suppose I was waiting for that question. Please do not take this pejoratively, but it is the intelligent and the intuitive who believe they can deduce an answer with their intellect; whereas, the grayest sheep in the flock, when the shepherd proclaims he can fly, will simply ask the shepherd to show him. Yes, Dr. Johnson, I can perform miracles.”

Smiling, Reese responded, “I don’t have a problem being the grayest sheep. I’m also not sure whether it would be the intellectuals or the sheep that would be cast in the negative by your story. However, I didn’t ask to see a miracle; I was simply trying to ascertain whether you believed you could perform them.”

“Well…would you like to see, Dr. Johnson?”

“Yes. I suppose I would.”

“A miracle of your choosing or mine?”

“Please, Elohim, you decide.”

“You believe my choice will be somehow revealing?”

“I am certain my choice would not be.”

Once again chuckling lightly, Elohim thought for a moment. “Dr. Johnson, if you would be so kind, there is a book I need on that table. Would you mind…?”

“Of course not.” Reese rose from his chair, turning to the corner where Elohim had gestured. There was a plain end table with a single book. He walked to the table and picked up the book. As he returned to his chair, Reese noticed the author’s name was his own. As his eyes moved up the front cover to the title, he froze in mid-step.

“Look familiar, Dr. Johnson?”

“This…this is a book I wrote fifteen years ago. It was to be my first.”

“What happened?”

“By the time I finished it, rewrote it and rewrote it again, I hated it. It had consumed my life, taking away hundreds of hours which I could have spent with my wife and children, making me ill-tempered and miserable to be around. And after all of that, I decided it wasn’t particularly good. One night, before I ever sent it to a publisher, I got drunk. I don’t even remember what happened. When I awoke the next morning, the manuscript

was torn to shreds, the file had been deleted from my hard drive, and then defrag had been run so I would be certain not to retrieve it."

"Please, look inside."

Reese opened the exquisite gold-leaf cover and skipped to the first chapter. Reading silently, he began to weep. He skipped from the beginning to several parts throughout the book, confirming the authenticity of each passage with a gasp of surprise. Eventually he closed the book and slowly placed it on the table between them. Cradling his face in his hands, Reese was silent for several minutes. Finally, Elohim reached over and placed his hand on Reese's shoulder. Instantly, Reese relaxed. The calmness was immediately followed by a wave of joy, of euphoria which filled his being.

"I…I never forgave myself for destroying that book. It was so self-centered. Claire had given so much of herself so I would and could write it. I spent so many hours writing while she took care of the children, took care of the house, went to bed alone, all so I could finish it. And I tore it up! Why? Because I didn't like it. To this day she swears she was never angry at me for what I did."

"That makes it worse. Doesn't it?"

"Of course it makes it worse. I would have preferred that she tried to scratch my eyes out."

"I know."

Reese picked up the book again, turning it over slowly in his hands. "How is this possible?"

Elohim smiled gently. "I believe that is why they are called miracles."

"May I keep this?"

"Of course. It is my gift to you."

Taking several deep, slow breaths, Reese said, "I believe I could use a break. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. I was going to suggest it. Take your time…I have plenty to spare."

"Thank you."

Reese stood and shuffled slowly to the door, clutching the book. As he opened the door, Elohim said, "Dr. Johnson?"

“Please call me Reese.”

“Thank you, Reese, for that courtesy. There was one other thing. I know that as you review this discussion in your mind, you are going to feel I made a major error in something I said earlier. I wanted you to know I did not make an error. It is you who are mistaken.”

“I’m sorry, Elohim. I don’t understand. Could you explain further?”

“No, I’d rather not. You will understand soon.”

As Reese turned to exit, he was facing the corner of the room from where he had retrieved his lost book. Freezing in place, he realized the table was no longer there.

Chapter Four

Lynn Sheffield held his sign higher as the television camera crew arrived at the front of Old Main. He and the group of thirty-five protesters were chanting “God bless everyone – no exceptions!” His sign read: “Don’t spend my tax dollars on religion” on one side and “Say NO! to Reese Johnson” on the other. Since his incident with Johnson and the FBI in the parking lot, Sheffield’s anger had been simmering to a boil. In his mind, the fact that Johnson was accompanied by government agents confirmed his worse fears. The administration, already having proclaimed that it was guided by God, was systematically tearing down the wall between church and state. The fanatic in the White House was clearly leading the country toward a theocracy.

If the very presence of the government agents had not been enough, Johnson calling one of them “Nicholas” clinched it. He was, obviously, rubbing it in Lynn’s face that there was a close alliance.

Sheffield had casually followed Reese Johnson’s career for years: from Johnson’s youth, when his face was plastered all over the media; through his several books, none of which Sheffield read; until his appointment at the U of A. It was not until his professorship at Harvard that he became a concern, and even then, not at first. He had, apparently, started his career at Harvard simply teaching philosophy, both ancient and modern, all straightforward textbook topics, nothing that Lynn Sheffield needed to be concerned about. It was not until last year that he created this religion course. Fortunately, he was still a year short of being tenured.

The call went out through the Internet, and the enlightened answered, burying the administration with a barrage of e-mails and letters asking for Johnson’s dismissal. Sheffield and the like-minded did not stop there. They began a systematic campaign of contacting the frequent and substantial donors to Harvard. The donors who already agreed were asked to write or call Harvard and threaten to stop the flow of money. Those who were not in agreement were pressured. If they were in politics, they were threatened with an activist campaign against them. If they owned a business, they were threatened with a boycott. As it had so many times before, the tactic

worked: the calls and letters arrived; the administration crumbled; and Johnson was dismissed.

Sheffield had not traveled to Harvard to join in the fray. He had done his part from Tucson with letters and e-mails. When it was announced that Reese Johnson had been hired by the U of A, Sheffield found himself at ground zero. Through the blogs, Lynn offered his services. Soon enough, details began to arrive, as did the "volunteers." In preparation for the arrival, Lynn lined up spare bedrooms among the homes of the sympathetic, but quickly found they were not needed. They checked in to Ventana Canyon, La Paloma, and some, to be close to the action, checked in to the University Radisson. Sheffield was amazed at the time that from faded denim purses or dog-eared synthetic leather wallets, platinum cards were pulled.

Rather than becoming disillusioned, Lynn was ecstatic. The movement was well funded. These people were committed. One of the out-of-town organizers, a mid-twentyish woman with pulled-back brown hair, brown sandals, baggy jeans, and a black T-shirt with the image of the Christian fish being swallowed by another fish with feet, came over to Lynn, pulling him aside.

"Hi, Shelby."

"Lynn, this is not enough of a turnout. How close are all the college bars?"

"Fourth Avenue, just a couple of blocks."

Digging into her jeans pocket, she pulled out a wad of bills and handed them to Sheffield, being careful to keep her body between the transfer of cash and the TV crew. "Here, hit a couple of bars. Get some people here to protest."

"Pay them?" Lynn was momentarily taken aback.

"Yeah! You got a problem with that?"

"Hell, no. It's cool!"

Turning on his heel, Lynn took off at a trot toward the Fourth Avenue bar district. The first bar he reached, which sounded as though it had a good crowd, was one of the area's gay bars. Within fifteen minutes he had nine

volunteers at $100 a pop. He called Shelby on his cell, telling her they were on their way, and moved on to the next bar on the block.

Half an hour later he was out of $100 bills and had sent another twenty-three college kids to the demonstration. Walking back to campus, Lynn stopped at an intersection, waiting for a green light. A silver Lexus stopped at the light, the driver sliding his window down and flicking out a cigarette. Furious, Lynn stepped into the street, picking up the butt and flicking it back into the Lexus before it sped away. He did not think the driver, who was on his cell phone, even noticed the butt fly onto the back seat. 'Good,' Lynn thought to himself. 'Maybe a nice big burn in that leather seat before he notices.'

Whether it was the growing crowd or the TV cameras, the demonstration had attracted even more people than Lynn had sent. The size of the gathering probably exceeded one hundred when he got back, and the participants were rowdy. The chanting sounded more like taunting. The young men and women, probably with several beers under their belts, violently jerked up and down the signs that Shelby and her people had provided. Lynn was exhilarated by it all: the smell of the grass, the warmth of the August early afternoon, the shouts, the bustle, the feeling that he was standing near a powder keg.

All four of the network affiliates were present. The videographers, all with the cultivated look of someone who just had a meal at the Salvation Army, followed the "talent" around, waiting for instructions. The reporters, the "talent," stood out from the rest of the crowd. They all seemed to be well lit, even when the camera light was turned off – perfect hair, amazingly white teeth, clothes of a color that was brighter and more intense than mere regular people could buy.

Asking her cameraman to set up, one of the reporters approached a protester. Going immediately into a question, she asked, "Why do you oppose Reese Johnson teaching here?"

Lynn recognized the protester as one of his recruits. The young man's hair was wild, as were his eyes. He turned to face the blond-haired reporter, staring down at her cleavage. "Who?"

"Professor Johnson. Why do you not want him teaching here?"

“Oh, yeah. I don’t know. ’Cause he’s a jerk.” Suddenly looking inspired, he added, “With what he does to female students…he shouldn’t be allowed to teach at all. Ha ha ha!”

Lynn had worked his way close enough to be able to shove his face between the drunk and the reporter, making sure the microphone was within inches of his mouth. “Reese Johnson is a hate monger! He believes that being gay is a crime! That marriage can only be between a man and woman! He wants us all to go back to the Dark Ages when only creationism was taught, and evolution was just a theory. He wants Muslim children in school to be forced to sit through a Christian prayer every day. He wants us to teach everyone that killing is bad by killing people. He teaches the opposite of tolerance. Instead of a world where we can all live together in peace, he wants us to all be judgmental and quick to condemn anyone who doesn’t agree with his religion. HE WANTS OUR TROOPS TO KILL IN THE NAME OF HIS RELIGION!”

“That’s ridiculous!”

Both Sheffield and the reporter turned to see who had interrupted. Looking agitated, still in his suit and tie in the sweltering Tucson heat, Dexter Mills stood next to them. Turning his side to Sheffield and directly addressing the reporter, Mills continued, “Everything this man has said is inaccurate or an outright lie.”

“And who are you, sir?”

“Dexter Mills. I am the head of the Humanities Department, who hired Reese Johnson.”

Lynn Sheffield stood fuming but decided to let this administration lackey hang himself on television.

“And you agree with what Professor Johnson says?”

“It’s irrelevant whether I agree or disagree. I believe in academic freedom.”

The reporter pressed, “Isn’t it true that Harvard fired Professor Johnson for what they termed ‘hate speech’?”

“Actually, no, you are mistaken on both counts: Professor Johnson was not fired – he quit; and Harvard never described anything that Professor Johnson taught as ‘hate speech.’”

Sheffield cut in, “Yeah, he quit, as in ‘Tender your resignation immediately or else.’”

“Young man, I’m afraid that you are also incorrect. In fact, when Professor Johnson gave his resignation, the administration offered to truncate the tenure requirements and grant him immediate tenure if he were to stay.”

Sheffield stood his ground. “That may be, but they muzzled him. They told him he couldn’t teach this nineteenth-century crap anymore.”

Taking a deep breath, Dexter answered, “At least now you are slightly closer to the truth, although still quite a distance from it. He was never told to cease teaching a single aspect of his course. The only requirement Harvard imposed was that he provide, within his course, a continuing forum for another faculty member to present a differing viewpoint.”

The reporter asked, “What’s wrong with that? Why did Professor Johnson refuse?”

Sheffield shouted, “Because he’s afraid of the truth!”

“Hardly, sir. The very basic concept of university instruction is that it creates an environment friendly to all thought, all ideologies. It would be consistent with that concept to have Karl Marx teaching a political science course at the same college as Winston Churchill. It would not be consistent to force them to co-teach a single course. That would do nothing but create a hostile environment. It has always been the belief that a university gives each point of view its ‘best shot’ at convincing the students, and then relies upon the critical thinking of the students to come to the best conclusion. Anything other than that structure is not a liberal education; it is simply programming.

“One other point. There is not another course taught at Harvard, by any professor, with the requirement to have an opposing perspective mandated within the course. In fact, I cannot think of a course taught anywhere, at any institution, structured in that fashion.”

Turning to face the camera, Sheffield said, “Maybe that gives you an idea of how dangerous this guy is.”

The reporter started to speak but Mills interjected, “Wait. I was wrong. I don’t want to mislead. I can think of several schools, major universities in

fact, that have the same requirement." Sheffield's eyebrows shot upward, not believing that he would get a moment's support from Dexter Mills.

Mills continued, "And all of them are in Communist China. In many of the courses, especially the humanities, economics, and political science, they post a party representative to make certain that alternative ideologies are never discussed, taught, or seriously considered."

Lynn, feeling the rug tugged out from under him, was silent. The reporter asked, "Are you comparing Harvard to the schools under a Communist regime?"

'Oh, boy!' Dexter thought to himself. 'I may have stepped in it.' "Absolutely not! The administration of Harvard was facing an orchestrated barrage from people like this gentleman, who made themselves heard on campus not only with demonstrations, but also with an organized letter-writing campaign, as well as an e-mail campaign that nearly swamped the capacity of the system. Additionally, their donors were pressured to stop giving funds to Harvard if they did not add their voices to the protest. This pressure took the form of boycotts against retail businesses, malicious and ill-founded complaints against the professional licenses of doctors and lawyers, et cetera. Being a privately funded institution, Harvard had no choice but to attempt a compromise."

"Why do you think the same thing won't happen here?"

"Oh, I believe it will. These people are too well organized, and they see Professor Johnson as too much of a threat for it not to happen. Fortunately, the University of Arizona is a publicly funded, land-grant institution. We receive substantial contributions from alumni, for which we are extremely grateful. However, our survival does not depend solely on those donations."

"But it will cost the University a substantial amount of money."

"Yes, it may. However, we have an administration here who believes that academic freedom has a price and that sometimes the price must be paid, or we will lose the freedom forever. We are also blessed with the fact that we are in a state comfortable with its maverick status and not afraid to stand its ground against the opinions of others."

Sheffield saw a golden opportunity. "You mean like fighting against Martin Luther King Day until the bitter end?"

“Actually, sir, I was thinking more of the tradition of Barry Goldwater who opposed discrimination against blacks long before most of the country jumped on the bandwagon.”

The reporter asked, “Certainly all of this controversy can’t be welcomed by the administration?”

“Of course not, and no one within the administration wants controversy for its own sake. On the other hand, if a little controversy is necessary to reinstate a lofty goal, so be it.”

“But is this really the topic where this university wants to make its stand?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, Professor Johnson does appear to be against so much of the progress that we have made in the last one hundred years.”

Dexter paused for a moment, thinking about what she had just said. “It’s Ms. Ryan, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

“Ms. Ryan,” he started, speaking slowly. “I can’t say that I’m impressed with your journalistic objectivity.” The reporter immediately turned a bright red. Unfortunately, Dexter was the only one to see this, as the camera remained on his face. “May I ask if you attended Professor Johnson’s lecture today? I don’t recall seeing you in the room.”

Suddenly less comfortable, keeping the microphone pointing toward Mills, Ryan answered, “No, I didn’t.”

“Perhaps you’ve read one of his books then?”

Trying to veer away from the obvious direction this was going, she said, “What Professor Johnson actually says isn’t news. If he gave his lecture today, and there was no protest, then we wouldn’t be here.”

“Indeed?” said Dexter. Turning to Sheffield, he asked, “What about you, sir? Were you in the lecture today? In fact, are you registered as a student?”

“I don’t need to subject myself to a morning of that mind-rot. I know what he stands for.”

“And my second question, are you a student here?”

Sheffield, looking defiant, answered, “No.”

“Ms. Ryan,” Dexter asked, “if not a single participant in this demonstration had attended the lecture, would that be news?”

“Not necessarily,” she replied. “If they were already familiar with his positions, they could certainly oppose his presence here without needing to sit through this lecture.”

“Would it be news if none of the participants had ever read one of his books or papers?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Would it be news if the majority of the kids shouting and carrying these signs had no idea who Professor Johnson was?”

“Uh….” She realized that she had veered from the frying pan into the proverbial fire. “Yes. I suppose that it would be news.”

Turning to one of the campus security officers, Dexter shouted, “Your megaphone,” making a beckoning motion with his hand. The officer unclipped the portable amplifier and hurried over. Grabbing it, Dexter trotted up the front steps of the old building. Not quite high enough as far as he was concerned, Dexter hopped onto the wooden railing, balancing himself by gripping a column.

Flipping up the switch, Dexter held the microphone in front of his lips and shouted, “Everyone, could I have your attention, please.” The chanting faltered for a moment. Dexter could see Sheffield talking animatedly to a woman wearing a black Darwin T-shirt. They started circulating among the group, shouting out the chant “Gods bless everyone – no exceptions!” and prompting others to do the same.

“Just for a few moments, please.”

Dexter noticed that the man with the red beard and the black Thirsted woman were stopping occasionally at certain members of the group, speaking directly into their ears. Those people would then start circulating, trying to intensify the chanting. Mills noticed that two of the camera crews had joined him on the porch, their video cams aimed toward the crowd. “TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS IN CREDIT AT THE CAMPUS BOOKSTORE FOR EVERYONE WHO IS QUIET!”

The effect of his offer spread quickly. Within moments there remained only about eight or nine members still chanting, including “Red Beard” and

“Darwin.” The diehards were circulating more rapidly, cajoling more intensely, attempting to counter Dexter’s effect to no avail. Apparently feeling that they were becoming too visible, upon Darwin’s signal, they stopped chanting, as well.

Turning to face a group of campus police officers and continuing to use the amplifier, Mills instructed, “Officers, please check the Cat Cards of those who are cooperating. Get their names and ID numbers so we can get them their credits.” Turning back to the crowd, Dexter smiled and said, “I want to thank all of you for congregating here today. Civic involvement is a beautiful thing.” Some muted laughter rippled through the crowd.

“All of you have already earned a credit for your willingness to cooperate. How many of you would like to earn a tuition waiver? Please, a show of hands.”

Most of the group enthusiastically raised their hands, some shouting out, “Yeah!”

“Good. We will do this like a game show. First of all, everyone who is a student here at the University and can prove it with a Cat Card or other acceptable form of ID, please move over to my right.” Approximately ninety students shuffled across the sidewalk to the grass on Dexter’s right, leaving Red Beard, Darwin, and about ten others. Almost all of the remaining group were those whom Darwin had conferred with during the chanting. Focusing on them, Dexter asked, “How many of this small group on my left have a valid Arizona driver’s license? If you do, please show it to one of the campus officers.”

Darwin shouted, “We’re not playing your game. We don’t care about tuition waivers.”

Mills replied, “I already assumed that. However, since you are on school property, we are within our rights to request to see your ID. Please, all of you produce it for the officer.” One of the campus cops went to the small group. Speaking to the campus officer, Mills said, “Please jot down their names.”

Turning his attention back to the large group, Dexter continued, “Okay, let’s start with an easy one. Everyone who thinks that Professor Johnson teaches one of the ‘hard’ sciences, raise your hand.” With satisfaction,

Dexter noticed that more than half the group had their hands up. “All of you with your hands up, please have a seat on the grass; everyone else, remain standing. Next question, how many of you think that Professor Johnson works in the Humanities Department?” There was more hesitation this time. Some of the students thought that they had the test figured out and that it was the hand-raisers who were getting eliminated. Only a dozen raised their hands this time. Smiling, Mills instructed, “Good job. All with their hands *not* raised, please sit down.” Amidst some laughter and teasing, the majority of the group sat on the grass.

“The next question is a bit tougher. Can you name a single title of one of the books that Professor Johnson has had published? A show of hands, but you will be asked to prove it.” Three hands rose out of the group. “Everyone who doesn’t know a title, please be seated.” Turning, again to the campus cops, he said, “Would one of you be so kind as to take a pad and pen to these three students and write down the titles they provide, separately please?”

One of the uniformed officers trotted to the three, and one at a time wrote down what they said, quickly bringing the pocket-sized notepad up to Dexter. Looking at the list, Mills said, *“Morality and Religion*. Whose answer was that?” One of the three raised her hand. Mills recognized her as Megan Mislin who had been so prominent in the lecture. “Ms. Mislin, please step forward.”

He glanced back down at the list and read aloud, “‘God and You.’ That was from…?” One of the two boys raised his hand. “Good guess but wrong. Please sit down.” Again he read from the notepad, “101 recipes for the perfect beer.” Laughter burst from the seated group, and Dexter looked up to see the remaining male student getting high-fives as he sat down, not waiting to be told.

“Ms. Mislin, thank you for participating. Your tuition waiver will be entered into your account tomorrow. To everyone else, I also would like to thank you for participating. The University of Arizona believes in an environment where each of you feels comfortable expressing your strongly held opinions. Thank you for your time, and please continue with your demonstration.”

Dexter handed the amplifier back to the campus officer and hopped down from the railing. Ryan, the TV reporter, was waiting, microphone in hand. “Professor Mills?”

He stopped to address her, “Ms. Ryan. Journalism is not my field. However, I believe that your story is over there…,” pointing at the group of nine standing to the side and looking quite frustrated. He turned and walked away.

Chapter Five

Reese sat in a mid-sized break room down the hall from where he had interviewed Elohim. Seated at the table with him were Claire, Nicholas Reynolds, Craig McWilliams, and Preston Bennett, who was introduced only as being from the State Department. His book rested on the table in front of Claire. Reese sipped his coffee and stared at the book.

"Well?" asked Bennett.

Wearily, Reese spoke slowly, without raising his head. "If you are asking me if I am ready to declare that man God, the answer is 'no.' If you're asking me if any part of the interview rules out that possibility, the answer is also 'no.'"

"How much time do you think it will take?"

Raising his eyes until he was gazing directly at the diplomat, Reese asked, "Have you met with him?"

"No, I haven't."

"Why not? Aren't you curious?"

"My personal curiosity is not the issue. I am here to get an answer and carry that answer back to my boss." Bennett was in his mid-forties, his gray hair mixed with nearly jet black at the temples. Clean shaven and well dressed, he looked every bit the bureaucrat.

"Well, your answer is still some time away." Turning to address McWilliams, Reese asked, "You've talked to him, right?"

"I have."

"Who else?"

McWilliams hesitated for a moment, glancing at Bennett for authorization to proceed. Bennett nodded almost imperceptibly. "Actually, other than the guard at the front desk, the first person to speak with him was the Director."

Curious, Reese inquired, "Isn't that a little odd?"

"Absolutely. However, when the gentleman announced himself and asked for the Director, he asked the guard to convey a name, which he did. Apparently that name was sufficient to cause the Director to feel that he

should speak to him, which he did for nearly an hour, in the same room where you met with…."

"Elohim."

"You were the first to be given a name?"

"Did he not use it with you?"

"He gave me no name. He said it was unnecessary."

"So you were the second to meet with him?"

"No, there were several before me, all linguists."

"Linguists?"

"Yes. After the Director finished with the meeting, he thought that it would be a good test."

"And what happened?"

Again the glance to Bennett. Again the nod. "The staff brought in people who are fluent in the 'mainstream' languages: Spanish, French, German, Russian. They then graduated to the more, ah, obscure languages."

"How did those go?"

"He aced them all. In fact, it was the consensus of the linguists that his grasp of each of the languages, which they had spent a lifetime studying, was far superior to their own. Apparently, not only were the vocabulary and grammar flawless, but the syntax was perfect, and each language was spoken with an accent that could only come from a native speaker. He also demonstrated an affinity for the various dialects of each language, in some cases correcting the linguist in a small error."

"How long has he been here?"

"Five days. And that's odd, also."

"How so?"

"During the last five days," McWilliams said, opening the cover on an already thick manilla folder and referring to some notes, "he requested and drank a total of two glasses of water and one glass of orange juice, ate one sandwich, visited the restroom once, and has yet to fall asleep."

Reese was incredulous. "He hasn't slept?"

"Not for a moment."

"Is that possible? I mean, for a normal person?"

"He is now at the outside edge of the envelope as far as records that have been set in the past. But no one who has stayed awake for five days can come anywhere close to being as alert and functional as he is."

Taking a moment to digest this all, Reese asked, "Was it after the linguists that you interviewed him?"

"Yes, it was. Like you, I was initially kept in the dark on what had preceded my interview. My first impression was that he was suffering from a severe narcissistic disorder. It is a symptom of that disorder for the person to feel godlike."

"Is that your opinion now?"

"Oh, God, no." Realizing what he said, McWilliams lapsed into a high-pitched, almost girlish sounding giggle.

"What is your opinion?"

"Professor Johnson, having not had the burden imposed upon me to be the 'final say' on this topic, I feel comfortable concluding that He is the real thing."

Feeling a slight adrenaline rush punch through his body, Reese leaned forward. "You believe that he is God?"

Taking a deep breath and letting it out very slowly, McWilliams answered, "I believe that He is who He says He is…the Creator."

"Why? What made you decide?"

"You mean other than the obvious – His demeanor…the way that you feel when you are in the room with Him – I would suppose it would be what He knows."

Reese, remembering his meeting, understood. "Can you be more specific?"

"Professor Johnson…."

"Please," Reese interrupted, "would everyone call me Reese?"

"I'm sorry. Reese, it is. I have been with the Bureau for almost thirty years. I now head the profiling unit. Over the years I've worked on hundreds of cases, and my success rate has been good. When we got to the same point in the interview that you reached, and He offered to produce a miracle, I did not choose your option of asking Him to pick the form. Rather, I told Him that I had been haunted for the last twelve years by a

serial rapist and killer whose victims had been little girls, all aged seven or eight. As far as we knew, there had been at least thirteen victims, and we were no closer to catching the perp after the last than after the first.

"He asked to borrow a note pad, which I gave Him. On it, He wrote the name and address of a man in Sacramento."

"Is that where the past crimes occurred?"

"No. Although the perp had moved around quite a bit, he hadn't done anything there that had come to our attention. I called the Sacramento office and had a team sent out. When they arrived and rang the doorbell, our man answered. After our agents identified themselves, the first thing out of his mouth was, 'Oh, thank God. I was praying that you would stop me soon.' Searching the house with permission, we found souvenirs from each of the previous killings. We also found a seven-year-old girl, bound and gagged, in one of the bedrooms. The perp has confessed to all of the killings, including two that we weren't aware of previously."

Reese asked, "Hasn't law enforcement gotten similar results from psychics in the past?"

"As far as I know, no psychics have ever been that specific; at least it has never been my experience that they have. But I did consider the possibility that He was simply clairvoyant, perhaps to a greater degree than any other we had worked with before.

"When I arrived back in the interview room, I told Him about the suspect we had captured based on His information. He seemed uninterested. Not that He didn't care, but almost as if He already knew. When He had given me the first name, I had torn the top sheet from the pad, leaving the blank pad on the table. After I returned, I noticed He had written nine other names and addresses. I asked who they were, and He told me they were the remaining nine killers that I had never found. They are being apprehended as we speak."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Claire, who had been silent to this point.

McWilliams answered her, "Not as amazing as what happened next. I confronted Him with my suspicion that He was simply a psychic, an incredible psychic perhaps, but not God. At that point He told me that His assistance in capturing the 'villains,' His word, was a labor of love and not

my miracle. I asked when my miracle was to occur, and He said it already had and that I was simply not yet aware of it."

"Are you aware of it now?"

To answer, McWilliams stood and walked to a storage closet, opening the door. He reached in and grabbed the handles of an obviously expensive and well-used motorized wheelchair, backing it into the room. In a voice so quiet everyone had to strain to hear him, McWilliams explained, "This chair has been my second home for nearly twenty years. When I was a field agent, we had a bust go bad, and I took a .45-caliber slug in the back, completely severing my spine just above the waist. I have not been able to walk; in fact, I have felt absolutely nothing from the point of injury down for twenty years. When He told me that my miracle had already happened, He reached over and pinched my thigh." McWilliams hesitated, overcome with emotion.

After a few minutes passed, he was able to speak without sobbing. "The pain was glorious. For a moment I thought that the miracle was just to be able to feel again. Then He stood up and stepped around to stand in front of my chair. In a way that I can only describe as lovingly, He lifted each of my feet and flipped the supports out of the way. And I felt each touch, each movement! Then He straightened and said, 'Craig, my beloved son, stand up and walk,' reaching out for my hands." Emotions again overcame him, and everyone looked down or away as McWilliams struggled to regain his composure.

"Not only can I walk, I walk easily. There is none of the muscle atrophy that I had just three days ago. I've been to Walter Reed for x-rays, MRIs, and CAT scans; everything is normal. My own doctor, who has treated me for the past twenty years, swabbed me for a DNA test because he doesn't believe it's me."

That intrigued Reese. "The results of that test…."

"Not in, yet. Hell, I mean heck, I'm even curious. One more thing – for years I've had physical therapy once a week, which included checking my weight. I had been to a therapy session only the day before my…my miracle. My weight was 246. They had been nagging me to cut back on

some of my eating to get down to at least 210. My weight is now 206. Forty pounds in four days."

Reese was stunned, unsure of what to say.

McWilliams continued, "There are other things. As I mentioned, my spine was severed above the waist. I was not only unable to walk or feel, I was also" – he paused, embarrassed – "dysfunctional in all other ways below the injury. My wife has suffered along with me for the last twenty years. That function has returned, as well. When I attended the training academy, I had four teeth knocked out while sparring. I've had a partial plate since then. My original teeth are back. And all of the little moles and skin tags that we all acquire as we get older are gone."

Reese once again found that his mind was not easily assimilating all of the input he was receiving. McWilliams' description of events threatened to overwhelm him. He glanced at Claire who was staring at McWilliams with a strange look on her face, a look he had never seen before. Eventually, first clearing his throat, Reese spoke. "To point out the glaringly obvious, we are dealing with a truly unique being. I think that we need to begin to consider the possibility, at least, that he is what he purports to be."

Reynolds spoke up for the first time. "But is he necessarily God?"

"Nicholas, that's a hard one to answer. By his own words, he does not choose that title. He prefers *Elohim*. However, he does describe himself as the Creator."

"Reese," McWilliams asked, "what, if any, significance does *Elohim* have?"

"Quite a lot, actually. I attempted to bait him a bit with my reference to it being a Hebrew name. Its history is much broader than that. According to scholars, *Elohim* or *Elohay* is the first name for God found in the Bible. In Genesis 1:1, it states that in the beginning *Elohim* created the Heaven and the Earth. From the very beginning, this plural form for the name of God is used to describe the One God. In fact, *Yahveh-elohim* was translated to mean either Yahveh of the Gods or Lord and Lord God. More confusing is that *bene ha'elohim* is said to mean Sons of God, Sons of the Gods or, according to some early rabbis, merely righteous men. In scripture, *Elohim*, as a prefix, describes several characteristics of God: *Elohay Tehilati* means

God of My Praise; *Elohay Mishpat* is the God of Justice; *Elohay Marom,* the God of Heights; *Elohay Mikarov* signifies God Who Is Near; *Elohay Mauzi* is the God of My Strength; *Elohay Kedem*…God of the Beginning; *Elohay Yishi* for God of My Salvation; *Elohim Kedoshim* is the Holy God; *Elohim Chaiyim*, the Living God; *Elohay Selichot*…God of Forgiveness; and *Elohay Elohim* means God of Gods.

"A slight variation of *Elohim*, *'lhm* was found in the writings of the Canaanite Ugarit and was believed to describe the entire pantheon of their gods. Some scholars believe that the names *Elohim* and the Islamic Allah come from the same root. 'Alah,' by the way, means 'to terrify.' It is claimed by some that *Elohim* is actually a plural and denotes the Holy Trinity. Others believe that the plurality is specific and that it describes not God but a Council of Gods who act in concert. But it gets even more complicated by the fact that *Elohim* also describes the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel, raised by Saul in 1 Samuel 28:13. Saul is told by the witch of Endor that she sees 'gods' (*elohim*) coming up out of the earth, which tells me that the name was also used in ancient Israel simply to mean something akin to 'divine beings.'

"In Mormonism, *Elohim*, also spelled *Eloheim*, usually refers to God the Father as a totally distinct being separate from Jesus. They refer to Jesus as Yahweh or Jehovah. They also believe that *Elohim* actually denotes the Council of Gods and believe that mortal men as children of God the Father, with the help of Jesus, can become like *Elohim* in every way."

"So," Reynolds asked, "the Mormons and the Jews believe in a Council of Gods, and the Catholics believe in a single God?"

"Yes and no," answered Reese. "The ancient teachings of the Jews indicated a belief in the Council, a belief that is downplayed today. The Catholics claim to be monotheistic yet believe in the Holy Trinity."

Reese continued, "There is also a spiritual philosophy called anthroposophy in which Rudolph Steiner attempted to marry science and religion. According to Steiner, there is a Hierarchy of Angels, and the *Elohim* are the 6th realm of this hierarchy in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. A noted pupil of Saint Paul, Dionysius the Areopagite, said this hierarchic level of divine spirits is called the Exousiai in Greek or

Potestates in Latin and is the next level above the three levels comprising the Angels, Archangels, and Archai/Principati. Since the human Self originated from them, the role of the *Exousiai/Elohim* in spiritual evolution is essential. The *Exousiai/Elohim* are intensely interested in the development of humanity. One of the spirits, Yahweh,was the divine ruler of the biblical Israelites who were supposed to receive the physical form of Christ as Jesus. Christ was a part of the Trinity, which ranks above all other hierarchies and is the direct ruler of the Exousiai.

"Lastly, there is a French journalist named Raël who in 1973 claimed to have been visited by Yahweh, the leader of an advanced race of extraterrestrials known as the *Elohim*. Yahweh taught Raël the origins of humanity and its purpose. Yahweh also told Raël that *Elohim* had been mistranslated to the singular 'God' and, in fact, was the plural word which means 'those who came from the sky.' This was the beginning of a movement called Raëlism."

McWilliams, who had listened avidly, asked, "So, according to all that, He might be God, an angel, a representative of the Council of Gods, or a spaceman?"

Reese answered, smiling, "Let's just say that his choice for a name certainly provides us with ample alternatives."

After a moment's silence, Bennett asked, "Do we have any idea what he wants?"

"I certainly don't," answered McWilliams.

"Neither do I," said Reese. "I guess that would be the appropriate direction to take at my next meeting with Elohim."

Bennett asked, "Then, can we get back to it?"

"I suppose we should."

"Reese, before you go back in, I have a question." It was Reynolds again. Reese noticed a concerned look on his face. "We've made quite a jump from trying to prove that he was an imposter to granting the possibility that he is some sort of spiritual being."

McWilliams asked Reynolds, "Do you blame us?"

"No, not at all. From what I've seen and heard, it's a pretty reasonable assumption. My question is this: since we are willing to pursue the realm of

the spiritual, has anyone considered that this man is from…ahhh…the other side of the coin?"

It was apparent from the silence following the question that no one had considered this possibility. Claire was the first to speak. "Do you mean the devil, the Antichrist?"

"I suppose I do. Isn't it the belief of most religions that there is one? I mean, if there can be a God, then why not the devil? And, if he is the devil, how do we figure that out?"

Reese considered this latest avenue. Logically, it made perfect sense. "Nicholas, I see your point. There are several teachings that foretell the arrival of Lucifer at the End of Days. According to some scholars, he is to arrive in a manner that deceives us, causing us to follow him."

Bennett chuckled. "This is rich. We were just trying to figure out if he is God. Now, maybe he's the devil? How do we sort that out?"

"I don't know," said Reese. "This is all so new. I'm not sure that a mortal can make the distinction. I'm certainly willing to give it a shot, but I'll be the first to cry 'uncle' if I'm feeling over my head."

"Very well," said Bennett thoughtfully. "Let's get to it."

Everyone started to rise, when Claire gently put her hand on Reese's arm. "Honey, could we have a few minutes alone?"

"Of course." Looking up, Reese said, "If my wife and I could have this room for a few moments? Oh, and Craig, is this room being recorded?"

"Yes, it is. I'll take care of it." Walking to the phone by the wall, McWilliams punched in a three-digit number and spoke softly into the mouthpiece. A moment later white noise filled the room. He hung up and turned back to Johnson. "It's off. The white noise continues until the microphones are turned back on."

Not sure whether to believe him, Reese turned to Claire questioningly. She nodded, still clutching his arm.

"Thank you. We won't be long."

Everyone filed out, and Reese turned to his wife. "What is it, honey?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'm afraid I'm a bit overwhelmed; I'm not sure."

“His last comment, as you left the room.”

“About his error?”

“Yes. Do you know what he meant?”

“I’m sorry, Claire. I haven’t had the time to focus on it yet. What was his error?”

Slightly frustrated, she sighed. “Reese, it’s not like you to miss something like this. When he talked about our children, he said that you and I contributed….”

“All of the genes that made them who they were,” said Reese, remembering, realization sinking in.

“If he knows everything that has happened, then either he’s wrong or….”

Taking a moment to consider the possibilities, Reese said, “That must be what he was talking about at the end. That means that if I’m wrong and he’s right….”

Claire just nodded, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

Reese jumped up and bolted to the door, looking into the hallway. Not fifteen feet away, leaning against the wall were Reynolds and McWilliams, waiting for Reese. “Could you both come back in a moment?” Reese did not wait for a response. Returning to the table, he clasped both of Claire’s hands. Reynolds was the first through the doorway.

“Nicholas, I have a favor to ask. I’d like a DNA sample taken from me. I’d also like a sample taken from my children back in Tucson. I’d like you to have your lab do a paternity test.”

Reynolds and McWilliams had the good grace not to ask any questions. Reynolds used the wall phone, asking McWilliams for the extension number, and in a few minutes a lab tech arrived with a glass vial containing a sterile swab. Snapping it open, she swabbed Reese’s cheek thoroughly, placed it carefully back in the vial, and retreated. Reynolds called his field office in Tucson and dispatched an agent, accompanied by a technician, to swab the children. He and McWilliams then followed the tech out, closing the door.

Claire called their son and daughter on their cell phones, letting them each know the agent was coming and explaining that it was just a test for a

virus. While she talked to them, Reese's eyes were drawn to the empty wheelchair. Evidence of its many years of use was clearly visible. The cushion on the seat was well worn, the paint rubbed off the control lever. The side facing Reese was covered with bumper stickers, large and small, including one that read "If you can read this, thank a teacher. If you're reading it in English, thank a Marine." Reese was struck by the pathos of the chair sitting empty and no longer needed. Having a lifelong tendency to anthropomorphize inanimate objects, Reese could not help but feel sorry for this once vital and now discarded part of Craig McWilliams' life.

Finishing her second call, Claire broke the connection and stared thoughtfully at the tabletop. Reese reached over and took both of her hands in his. She finally asked, "How long will it take?"

"I'm not sure. I think a couple of days."

"Reese, will it matter if they are yours?"

He thought for a while. "I don't see how. I couldn't love them any more than I already do."

"I know that. I'm not sure what I mean."

They sat in silence until Reese said, "I should be going back in."

"I know." She slid her hands out from under his and immediately placed them on top, grabbing his hands firmly and saying nothing. Reese stared at her face. It was framed by thick, brown hair that she had secretly begun to dye to cover the first of her gray. Her deep brown eyes looked worried, troubled, anxious, and somehow happy, all at the same time.

They continued to sit without speaking, listening to the hiss of the white noise, her grip on his hands not loosening, not wanting to let him go quite yet. "You know, I've seen so much of you in both of them…since they were born. I've denied it, thinking it was just wishful thinking, but I've still seen it in their eyes, the shape of Matthew's jaw, Melissa's ears, her big toes. My God, Reese, I've never seen big toes like that on anyone but you."

He laughed. "They are lovely, aren't they?"

"Lovely, no. Beautiful, yes, because they're yours."

"I love you, Claire."

"I love you, too."

"If this is all true, why do you look so unhappy?"

“It’s change. You know how I am about that. We’ve been a happy, loving family, and this could somehow change things.”

Leaning forward and kissing her lightly on the cheek, Reese said, “My love for you will never change, nor will my love for Matthew and Melissa. It will only get stronger.”

Twisting around in her chair, she put her arms around his neck and pulled him against her. As he held her tightly, he could feel her quaking with gentle sobs. They embraced until the sobs subsided. Slowly, she unwrapped her arms from his neck and straightened. “Reese, I don’t know who this guy is…but you’d better get your butt in there and find out. And I mean find out for sure. We…everyone is counting on you.”

“No pressure, huh?”

“Nope. None. Now go!”

“You coming?”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Okay.”

Reese returned to the hallway, joining up with Reynolds and McWilliams. “Where’s Bennett?”

McWilliams answered, “He went to his office. He said he’d be back shortly.”

Taking a deep breath, Reese said, “All right. Let’s get back in there.”

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“Elohim,” Reese started. “You’ve given us a lot to think about.”

Without the least hint of irony, Elohim answered, “That is my way.”

“You have been quite persuasive in convincing all of us that you are a supernatural being. There is some concern that you may not be as benign as you appear.”

“Perhaps I am not.”

That was definitely not the answer that Reese expected.

“It has even been suggested that you could be….”

“Satan?”

"Yes."

"That, my dear Reese, is a different subject than your first question. Please allow me to reply to both. Like the Creator described in scripture, I have the capacity to be both benign and vengeful, as is needed. It is I who created the butterfly, and it is also I who destroyed entire civilizations."

"The Old Testament God?"

"For lack of a better description, yes."

"So you are not the God of the Christians?"

"I am the Father."

"As in 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'?"

"An unfortunate misquote. What Jesus actually said was 'Forgive *me*, Father, for they do not yet know what they do.'"

Understanding came instantly to Reese. "You sent him here?"

"I did. That is known well."

"But it is believed that Christ was sent to die for our sins, to allow us access into Heaven."

"Again, unfortunate misunderstandings. Jesus was sent to be the light for all to follow. Prior to His arrival, mankind was inexorably moving toward a dismal destination. Had He not come to Earth, another cataclysm was inevitable."

"A great flood?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps another comet. It had not yet been decided. My Son asked to be allowed to intervene, to attempt to change the course of humanity. The request was unprecedented, yet I could see no harm. At the end, He felt that His visit here was truncated…that His goals had not been reached. He underestimated the influence of His words."

Reese's mind whirled, flitting from statement to statement that had been attributed to Christ. "So when Christ said to the Jews, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM'…."

"He meant it quite literally."

"It appears that His mission was a success."

"As are so many things in the universe, it was less of a success than was hoped and less of a failure than was feared. His time spent on Earth was

well spent. Not only did He change the course for much of mankind, He also planted the seed that prepared all of you for this day."

Reese started to speak but was stopped by Elohim raising his hand slightly. "We could continue to satisfy your curiosity for many hours regarding my Son. None of that would bring us any closer to the conclusion of the task at hand. I ask that we may continue. To answer your second question, I am not Lucifer."

"That's it. You simply say it, and I am to believe?"

"No, it is not that simple. Perhaps I underestimated your depth of knowledge. I assumed that when I spoke my name, that fact would suffice to allay your fears."

In a flash, Reese recalled that in the teachings of the Christians, Jews, and others, it was stated that the evil one could not speak the name *Elohim*. He might, to deceive, call himself Jehovah, Yahweh, even God, but never *Elohim*. Taken aback for a moment, Reese then continued, "You have made the lame walk. You have caused a manuscript that I had destroyed to appear, fully bound, and have caused a table to materialize and de-materialize. It would be child's play for you to plant that historical fact."

"Beware, Reese, that skepticism leads to suspicion, which will take you directly to cynicism and paranoia."

"I am sufficiently well trained in psychology to know those boundaries. It is not my intent to be insulting or rude. However, I have been asked to authenticate, at least to my own satisfaction, that you are who and what you say. I have no choice but to take that responsibility quite seriously."

"Of course, you do. I was merely pointing out that once you grant the possession of certain powers to me, it becomes impossible to think of a method for authentication which does not include the possibility of that method being manipulated, corrupted, or even constructed by me."

"That is, of course, quite true. Please indulge me, then, in a discussion about the one we refer to as Satan. Perhaps there will be something in what you say that will give me some comfort."

"Of course. As it is written, Lucifer was once what you refer to as an angel, an angel of the highest tier. He did fall from grace, in a manner of speaking, and was banished from Heaven."

“To hell?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. His hell is on Earth. He lives among you. The only acts that he may perform in the material world are through you. He does not live what you would consider to be a temporal existence. He is deprived of all sensory input and can only see, smell, hear, taste, and feel through someone who allows him to enter.”

“Possession?”

“In a sense. Lucifer occupies many. He lives through them all. He guides, cajoles, directs, rewards, motivates, coerces, and commands all under his influence, according to their weaknesses, to achieve his goal.”

“Which is?”

“To prevent me from achieving mine.”

“And what is yours?”

“To bring you to Heaven.”

“Why would he oppose that? If he doesn’t have a kingdom of hell to fill with souls, why would he care if we went to Heaven?”

“That is a complex question to answer. As scripture describes, Lucifer hopes to return to the realm of Heaven at some point, either as a conqueror or as one who has been forgiven. In the interim, his kingdom is here. The more who embrace him, the more intense sensations he feels. He is the ultimate hedonist, addicted to the ultimate drug of the overwhelming sensory stream that he receives from his disciples. If all were to abandon him and cast him out, he would be in an eternal darkness.”

“Sensory deprivation.”

“Yes, except that he would be deprived of the senses of millions. Your own scientists have discovered that even minutes of the deprivation of only your own senses can drive you mad. Imagine what Lucifer would experience.”

“And this addiction is endangered by you?”

“Yes. Each soul I take to Heaven is one less available to him. He also despises me, providing further motivation for obstructing the perfection of my goals.”

Elohim stopped to give Reese an opportunity to absorb all of this. So much of what Elohim said related to all that Reese had learned in a lifetime

of study of the world's religions, and yet, it was different or perhaps more complete.

"Can Lucifer be redeemed?"

"Yes, he can. At a time of his own choosing he may be forgiven. But that will not happen until two things occur: first, he must realize the error of his original offense; second, he must willingly and voluntarily cease this parasitical behavior on mankind."

"Kick the habit?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"You expect him to give up all of the input, to plunge himself into an absolute darkness, in the hope that you will grant him forgiveness?"

"Exactly."

"Will he ever do that?"

"Reese, as I explained before, the future is not preordained. However, I do not believe that he ever will."

"You mentioned his original offense. What was that?"

"It is complicated. Partially, he did not want humankind to be granted access into Heaven."

"Pretty much what the Bible says!"

"Yes. He felt that your presence would befoul a wonderful place."

"That's why this is hell."

"Indeed. Not only must he live among these beings whom he found to be so disgusting, but he must live within them and through them."

"You are bad!"

Laughing, Elohim replied, "I believe I mentioned that earlier."

Chapter Six

Bennett did not have to sit long in the waiting area outside the boss's office. Within two minutes of his arrival, the aide ushered him in. The Secretary of State, Clayton Dean, was seated behind his desk, not embellishing his importance by shuffling through papers as Bennett was seated; instead, he was sitting on the front edge of his seat, hands clasped and resting on the desk, clearly anxious.

"Bennett, how is the interview going?"

Bennett took a moment before answering, trying to organize his thoughts. "I'm not sure how to answer that, Clay. Reese Johnson has only spoken with our stranger once. By the way, we have a name for him."

"We got a 'hit' on CODIS?" he asked, referring to the FBI's Combined DNA Index System.

"No. Not yet. I meant, he gave us a name. He gave it to Johnson. According to the professor, it has quite a bit of significance. I've put it all in a report to you."

"Very well. So, it appears our professor is buying this guy?"

"He says it's a little early for a decision, but he surely seems to be."

"After only one chat?"

"Yes. Quite a chat from what I understand."

"Damn shame I can't see a video of this stuff."

"I know. The techs are still working on it, but I think they're stumped. We're even watching an image that's fed through the recorder; but when we try to play it back, it's blank, as though it has been erased. Same thing with audio recordings. We've got a court stenographer taking it all down now, but it's not the same."

"No, it isn't. What about McWilliams? Any additional word from the doctors on that?"

"Nothing new. They're using the word *miracle*. No one has ever seen anything like it."

"I have something to tell you. We received a call from the Bureau after you left this afternoon. It seems that the professor and his wife huddled up

alone for a while, then asked Special Agent Reynolds to get a technician to perform a paternity test for him and his children."

"Paternity test? You want me to check this out?"

Dean stared at the ceiling for a minute, then answered, "No. Not at this point. Let's let the guy and his wife have some privacy."

Bennett looked at his boss quizzically. Some of Dean's predecessors would not have taken the high road, no matter how sensitive the issue. He asked, "Clay, where do you see this going?"

"It's hard to say, Preston. All I know is that our friend at the FBI, Bill Burke, called the Chief after his little meeting with this guy, and I'm not sure what was said, but it was enough. We've been asked to get involved, using whatever resources we need, and figure out if he is for real."

"And if he is?"

"I haven't been briefed on that. I did have a quick chat with Bill this morning. Apparently, no matter what we decide, we need to have our ducks in a row because we'll be going public."

"Public, why?"

"I believe our guest is planning on doing that himself. He's just giving us a courtesy look beforehand. The President wants us to have a position on him before that happens."

"How much time do we have?"

"Bill said that isn't a problem. Our guest has no firm timetable in mind."

"Clay, how did State end up with this?"

At that, Clayton laughed. "I think the Chief looked around and noticed that we didn't have a Department of Faith."

"With him as President, I'm surprised we don't."

Now they both laughed at their leader's expense. The Secretary continued, "You're right, you know. He is the most religious President we've had since Lincoln."

"At least, the most visible about it."

"And God knows he's taken enough flack about it."

"From what I've seen the last couple of days," Bennett said wryly, "I'm sure He does know."

It took Clayton a moment to catch on. "Preston, is our guest getting to you, too?"

Bennett looked away from his friend for a moment, hoping to gaze out the window. Unfortunately, the drapes were pulled closed – one of the realities of Homeland Security.

"I guess he is. I haven't met with him yet and I'm not sure I want to."

"Why?"

"Clay, supposedly this guy knows every word you've ever said, every thing you've ever done, even every thought you've ever had."

Teasing, Dean said, "Something to hide?"

"We all have *something* to hide. I'm not talking about an affair or some past crime. I've kept my nose clean my whole life. It's the little stuff…the times that I wasn't as honest or fair or noble, I guess, as I should have been. We go through our lives building this construct of who we are, almost as if we're playing a role. We only present that person to the world, to our friends, our wife, our kids. Sitting down face to face with someone who knows it all scares me to death."

"You're a Lutheran, right?"

"Yeah."

"Haven't you been taught that type of judgment is coming?"

"Yes, I have. But that's someday. And then I would be dead without much choice in the matter. I don't know, Clay, I guess it was always a little abstract. I haven't really lived every minute of my life as if judgment was a certainty."

Leaning back in his chair, Dean clasped his hands behind his head. "Preston, I picked you for this because you're a friend, and I trust you. I also picked you because you have a faith. I think one of the reasons that the President chose State for this process is that I don't. He's always bending over backward, trying to address his critics before they've even spoken."

"I know. That's what I like about him."

"Same here. But, as I said, I don't have a faith, or if I do, it's pretty vague. I'm not quite comfortable calling myself an atheist because I've

always suspected there is something. But that something could just be an energy, kind of a field to which we all contribute. And when I say all, I don't just mean men and women; I mean dogs and lions and birds and plants and bacteria, all life. Sometimes I visualize it as a larger being, as though all of us are just components, and each of our brains is like one brain cell in our own skull. We'd have no more of an idea what *that* brain is thinking than one of my brain cells could know what I am thinking right now."

"You're not the first to come up with that. There are a lot of New Age proponents who believe that. The problem I have with that theory is – what's the point? What's the point of our lives?"

"Each of our individual lives has no more point than each of our brain cells. The brain itself, the being – whoever that is – continues. We are born and live and contribute to the task until we die, just like an individual cell. We may be gone, but the 'mind' continues, and somewhere, incorporated into that mind's consciousness, are our minute contributions. Our contributions live on."

"Clay, doesn't that theory just kick all of the questions up one level? I mean, if what you say is true, then what is the purpose of the 'mind'? Are there other 'minds'? Where did they come from? What is their purpose? Do they die, and, if so, do they have an afterlife?"

"Whoa, Preston. All I said was that sometimes I visualize things that way. I never said I have taken the time to put together a whole theory. I don't know the answers to any of those questions, and I'm not sure that they can be known."

"Or should be?"

"No, maybe they shouldn't. Getting back to you…you have nothing to fear from meeting with him. All of those impure thoughts, all of the minor lapses in judgment, the momentary lapses of nobility are all a part of being human. I don't believe, if there is a God, that His expectations would be that great. I believe that He would judge us, not on our failures, but on our actions after the failures, our ability to correct our flaws and rise above them."

"You sound like my minister."

“Let’s put it this way…if He isn’t that kind of God, I’m not interested in His Heaven.”

“Careful, Clay, this may not be an abstract discussion anymore.”

Smiling, Dean answered, “I’d say the same thing if He were sitting in this room.”

For a moment, Bennett was tempted to turn around and look. After recent events, it wouldn’t surprise him to see the old man suddenly materialize in the corner.

Noticing, Clayton said, “He’s got you spooked, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” Bennett said without hesitation. “He has made a man walk who had a severed spinal cord, produced a manuscript that was destroyed years ago, fluently spoken with every linguist that Fort Detrick could throw at him. Good grief, Clay, in a closed interrogation room with Johnson – observed from the control room by McWilliams, Professor Johnson’s wife, and me, plus all of the techs – he made a table appear and then disappear. Yes, I’m spooked.”

“Not to mention the killers and rapists that Justice has picked up.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, what’s the plan from here on out?”

“Johnson is bright. He’s a good man for this job. By the way, whose idea was he?”

“Came from the White House. They wanted someone who was an expert, not a church figure, and not someone with an agenda.”

“I don’t think that you can say Johnson doesn’t have an agenda. Have you read any of his books? He’s basically pro-religion.”

“I haven’t read any of them until now. I’ve just started *Morality and Religion*. He makes a strong case. That’s not what I meant. The Chief wanted someone who wouldn’t set out to do a hatchet job, had some credibility, and was fairly well known.”

“Professor Johnson fits all of that to a tee. I don’t think he actually has a plan at present. As I said, he’s back in with him and, I guess, just, sort of, playing it by ear.”

“All right.” Clayton tilted forward in his chair, sliding back up to the desk. “You’ll keep me posted?”

“Of course.”

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Lynn Sheffield was punching his remote, switching from one newscast to another, becoming angrier by the minute. The local affiliate station that Kate Ryan worked for had started out favorably on the five o’clock newscast, recapping Johnson’s termination at Harvard, showing the chanting protesters, and ending with Lynn’s own comments. Satisfied with her coverage, he then turned to the local Fox station and, to his horror, saw that they were showing the discussion between Mills and Ryan! Apparently using a directional microphone and a long lens, they had the entire exchange, culminating in her comment exposing her own feelings about Johnson, as well as Mills’ chastisement of her. They went on to show his performance on the porch, with a close-up of the beer-swilling idiot that Lynn had recruited from the bar, high-fiving his friends and grinning at the camera.

By the six o’clock news, Ryan’s coverage had been completely re-edited, showing the protesters briefly, the entire “game show” put on by Dexter Mills, and then ending with the crowd dispersing as Lynn and Shelby and the other organizers desperately tried to reignite the demonstration. The other stations covered it much the same way, and Sheffield was about to turn off the TV, when his phone rang. Thinking it was Shelby, he snatched it up. “Hello.”

A male voice asked, “Is this Lynn Sheffield?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“Mr. Sheffield, this is Dave Bacon from KXXI Radio. I’m the host of a local talk show in town, and you are on the air. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“YES, I DO!” Lynn shouted, hanging up. Bacon was another one of those conservative talk show guys, spewing hate all over the airwaves.

Deciding he had better tune in to the show, just to find out exactly what those people were up to, he ran to his radio, turned it on, and switched to AM. It only took a moment to find the station: *“...a few questions?...YES, I DO!”* Sheffield realized the station was on a time delay and he was hearing

his own answer. Bacon went on, “Well, there you go. We tried. Another wacko liberal totally afraid to engage in a dialogue. Do these people ever talk to anyone who doesn’t agree with them? Well, I think the coverage was clear enough on TV. The only real protesters were out-of-town pros. We had one of our interns on campus today, and he told us that they were hitting the bars on Fourth, paying ONE HUNDRED BUCKS to anyone who would join the demonstration. A hundred dollars. Unbelievable. That just shows you there really isn’t an honest, deep-rooted liberal group out there. It’s a small bunch of fanatics, well financed by billionaire William Stavros and….” Sheffield punched the power button so hard that he knocked the radio off the shelf.

Unsure what to do with himself, Lynn paced his living room until the phone rang again. Snatching it up, he shouted, “Listen, you moron. I don’t want to….”

“LYNN! Lynn, it’s Shelby.”

“Oh, Christ, Shelby, I’m sorry. I thought it was that talk-show fool again.”

“It’s all right. Listen, I wanted to call you and thank you for your help.”

“What help? It looks like I screwed it up. The fact that I paid those people is splashed all over the news.”

“I know. It’s okay, really. Anyway, we’re out of here.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I’m sorry. This didn’t get off to a good start. We can still fix it, though.” He sounded almost desperate.

“No, we gotta go. It’s not about this thing. We’ve been called to Washington, D.C. Something is going on there.”

“What?”

“Don’t know yet. We got a tip that it might be kinda big, so we decided to set up there. Some others are meeting us, pretty much the whole group.”

“Can I come?” Sheffield sounded like a little brother asking his big sister if he could go with her to the movies.

Shelby hesitated. “Let me check. I’ll let you know.”

“Okay. When are you leaving?”

“Right now. I’m on my cell; we’re heading for the airport.”

Lynn realized that they did not even ask him for a ride. He must have really screwed up with them. “All right. Well, you’ll let me know?”

“Sure will, Lynn. And thanks for all of your help here.”

Before he could answer, she had pressed the end button.

Sheffield stood staring at the phone in his hand. It all started to well up inside: the interrupted confrontation in the parking lot with Johnson, the aborted demonstration, the horrible media coverage, and now this. He wanted to be a part of this group, this movement, so badly, and they were scooting out of town without even giving him a chance. Screaming, Sheffield turned and threw the cordless against the TV, exploding the screen. Tiny shards of glass pelted him, giving him minor cuts on his face and arms, but he did not care.

‘Something big in Washington, D.C.,’ he thought. ‘I’ll go there. It won’t be hard to figure out. They will pop up in a big way, high-profile, lots of media.’ When they did, he would be there, ready to join in and help. He could prove himself to them yet. No matter what it took.

Chapter Seven

Elohim noticed that Reese was fidgeting, toying with a paper clip, bending and reshaping it, without saying anything. “Reese, the air hangs heavy with the question you want to ask. Why do you not?”

Reese continued to stare at the paper clip, preparing his response. “I suppose I am afraid.”

“Fear is your enemy. There are some among you who believe that the ultimate dichotomy is not love and hate, but rather love and fear. There may be some truth to that.”

“Doesn’t fear protect you at times?”

“Does it? The rabbit fears the coyote, and yet, it is not his fear which helps him escape. It is his fear which causes him to become immobile, an easy prey.”

“Does not fear of punishment cause us to be better people? You said yourself that judgment is critical; so, should we not live our lives in fear of that judgment?”

“My son, does fear of imprisonment prevent *you* from killing a fellow human being?”

“No.”

“Does your fear of my judgment prevent it?”

“No.”

“Then, why do you not kill?”

“Because it is wrong. Because it is immoral to do. Because killing another person is not who I am.”

“And you would not kill if there existed no prohibition against it?”

“No, I would not.”

“As you said, I spoke earlier about the need for judgment. However, I did not explain the mechanism. The result of my judgment is not punishment; it is only reward, reward for being the kind of person I see as being a just, noble, and good person. Perhaps of more importance, the reward is for having become the kind of person who is fit to live with me in Heaven.”

“Isn’t the absence of that reward a punishment?”

“I have told you there is no hell, at least in the classical sense. Those who do not go to Heaven simply do not go to Heaven. If they choose to view that as a punishment, so be it. The outcome is, after all, a result of their own doing, their own choices and decisions throughout their lives. If I offer you a loaf of bread, and to receive it, you are asked to walk across the room and fetch it, either you will do so or you will not. If you walk across the room and take bread, I assume you want it. If you do not, I assume you don’t. If you maintain loudly and unpleasantly that you want the loaf very much, and yet, you refuse to walk across the room to get it, I assume that indeed you do not want the bread. I also assume you are a fool. If, in the end, you do not have the loaf of bread, have you been punished?”

“I understand what you are saying, but you aren’t implying that getting into Heaven is that simple.”

“Of course I do not mean to imply anything of the sort. I compared a loaf of bread with a brief walk. The price paid is fair for the item received. Living in Heaven is an eternity of wonder and happiness. Surely it is worth a mere, single lifetime of becoming and being a person fit for the privilege? But, please, dear Reese, I continue to wait for you to tell me of a benefit of fear.”

“I still believe fear prevents us from doing ourselves harm.”

“In a manner of speaking, it does. However, if you were to find yourself standing at the edge of a roof three stories high, do you not know intellectually that if you step off, you will break your legs, or perhaps worse? Do you need fear to tell you not to do it?”

“No, I suppose I don’t. You’re saying wisdom takes the place of fear?”

“Yes. And it is far superior to fear.”

“Then, perhaps fear is a precursor of wisdom. Perhaps we have it to warn us of a danger we have not yet learned, or perhaps to warn us of a danger we cannot quantify or even identify through wisdom alone.”

“For example?”

“I have two. My first example for a precursor would be all of our childhood fears. We have not yet had the time or training to learn all that

can hurt us. Doesn't fear keep us alive until our education is more complete?"

"Excellent. And your second?"

"I have met people in my life who looked 'normal.' Everything about them, if I analyzed them only intellectually, appeared to be fine. And yet, I have felt fear from time to time, and that fear caused me to get away from those people. In most instances I have never known if it was a wise decision; but, in a few, I later discovered they were not good people, perhaps they were even horrible people, and it was wise to get away. I had no wisdom I could have used at those moments – only my fear, and it served me well."

"Both are good examples. You would not have been equipped with fear if it did not serve a purpose, and you have done a very good job of describing the purpose. The problem with fear is that you do begin to rely upon it at an early age and, for many, you never replace it with the wisdom you acquire. It is fear, for some, which prevents you from ever becoming a singer, an actor, or an orator. It is fear which may prevent you from approaching the person who would become the love of your life. Those fears and many others were outgrown long ago and never discarded. So tell me, Reese, what is the name of the fear you feel at this moment? The fear preventing you from asking your question?"

"I fear your answer."

"Why?"

"Elohim, I was at one time a devout Catholic. In many ways I still am. As a result of, well, a terrible time in my life, I briefly turned my back on the Church, on all faith. I eventually returned, not only to attend mass and receive the blessed Sacrament, but to study the faith. At that time there was a movement in the world which told us our religion was irrelevant and science was all we needed. That movement has grown, and it has intensified to the point where we are now told our faith is dangerous and hateful. I have made it my life's work to prove them wrong, to show that faith in God and a belief in the teachings of God are more important now than ever."

"I know all of this. How does this lead you to fear my answer to your question?"

“I’m sad to say that it must be my ego. I have quite a lot at stake, have gone so far out on the limb I can barely see the trunk. Your answer will either confirm all I believe, or shatter it, making my life a waste. No, it would be worse than a waste because I would have misled so many who believed me.”

Reese’s voice, throughout his answer, had gotten softer and more intense. He was leaning forward as he spoke, his face extended halfway across the table toward Elohim. Slowly, gently, Elohim reached out and placed his hands upon Reese’s. Reese’s body shook as he once again felt the surge of joy sweep through him. All of his fear, anxiety, and tension were washed away by the torrent. “My son, my dear Reese, you have nothing to fear from my answer. Ask your question.”

Taking a deep breath, Reese then swallowed, attempting to ensure a steadiness in his voice. Finally, he asked, “Why are you here? Why have you come now?”

Elohim removed his hands from Reese’s. Their absence created an immediate void. Reese found himself craving their return.

“This visitation has been foretold many times. All of the true prophets spoke of it. My Son, Jesus, did His best to prepare you for it. I have come to judge.”

Reese could not have been prepared for the impact these words had upon him. They pierced him like a bolt of lightning. Struggling to maintain his composure, he remained speechless. Elohim, giving him time to assimilate this news, said nothing. For the first time during these interviews, Reese thought about the others outside the glass, especially Claire, and how they were receiving this.

After several minutes, Reese recovered sufficiently to speak. “The End of Days?”

“Again, my friend, I do not want to appear evasive, but, yes, for some that is the case.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand…will your visit differ from Revelation?”

“Revelation portrayed the Day of Judgment as a period of great tumult and calamity. It also spoke of it as being a necessary precursor to this day.

Those things which have been described are not inevitable, and they are certainly not of my direct making."

"There will not be a holocaust?"

"If there is, it will be man-made."

"No Antichrist?"

"Not in the sense it is written and as it is interpreted by scholars. There are those who will be most displeased with my arrival and angered by my intent. Among those may arise a leader. I cannot say. His actions may fulfill the prophecy."

"Will there be a 'rapture'?"

"There were also some slight inaccuracies in that passage, as well. Those among you who have earned the privilege of living for an eternity in Heaven shall be taken. Will there be a mass phenomenon, with the Chosen suddenly disappearing from their beds, offices, cars, and airplanes? No, that is not how it will occur. Nor will it be involuntary. It will be orderly. It will be a pleasant transition for those who go."

"Voluntary?"

"Yes. There are those who are invited and who will choose to stay. They will be allowed to do so. I do not want anyone living with me who does not wish to be there."

"Why would anyone choose not to go?"

"That is an easier question to answer than you might think, and I am certain that if you were not still so shaken by the course of this conversation, it would have occurred to you. Reese, I am not saying this is the case, but, hypothetically, if you learned you were chosen and Claire or Melissa or Matthew was not, would you go?"

"No. I would not."

"There is your answer. There will be many to whom that decision will be presented."

"Do they ever get to Heaven?"

"Yes, assuming their continued lives on Earth do not suddenly take a different path with their worthiness destroyed, they will join me at a point in the future."

“And what of those who have died in the past?”

“They linger here…waiting for my return. They have watched and guided and helped and protected and loved their earthbound kin from beyond.”

“Beyond?”

“As they tarry, not having been yet restored to their earthly forms, they have only their essences, their souls.”

“As is the case with Lucifer?”

“An unpleasant comparison, but, yes, the construct is also the same.”

“So they have no means to sense?”

“Correct, unless it is through you. To illustrate, if you have loved ones who have passed on, yet remain around you, they can only see you if they look through another being who is close to you, who can see you. They can only hear your voice if they have borrowed the sense of someone within earshot of you. They can only feel your touch if they not only occupy a being within your reach, but also one whom you would touch with love.”

“You said ‘a being’ as opposed to a person.”

Smiling, Elohim said, “It is nice to see your powers returning. Yes, a being. An ideal example would be this: A man loses his beloved wife. He adores her and never remarries, never spends an intimate moment with another woman. She wishes to remain with her dear husband. She wishes to see him every day. She wishes to love him and be loved by him until he joins her. She wants to protect him and help him, but her form does not allow any of this to occur.”

“It sounds as though you are making an argument for remarriage.”

“Not at all. In fact, if he were to remarry, and she were to ‘borrow’ the senses of the new wife, then his words, his touch, his love would only cause sadness and bitterness for his departed. She would still love him, and yet, his love would not be for her but for the new wife. No, she would need an alternative.”

“A dog!”

“Yes. When everyone else is shut out of his life, who else would spend so much time with the grieving husband? Who else could show so much love? Who else could receive so much love back from him with none of the

pain a new wife would cause? For some, it might be a cat, a horse, even a canary. I must admit, though, the dog seems to be ideal for this purpose. In fact, it is the primary reason dogs have become so incorporated into your lives."

"So, to interact with the living, those who stay must each possess someone?"

"No, possession is within the realm of evil. It is a usurping of the hosts' very being to implant their own. The very nature of the essence, the soul, is that it may look *through* others without displacing them. It is nearly always done without the hosts' awareness."

"Nearly?"

"Yes. There are some on Earth who are sensitive, much more sensitive than all others. They can feel the presence. And if souls are peering through them at the time, they can even talk with them and hear their answers."

"Seems like a flaw in your design."

Elohim laughed again. "One could say that. It does no harm, and most do not believe it is real. The Chosen, who have remained, understand what they should and should not disclose and, by definition, they are honorable souls or they would not be chosen."

"And those who have died and are not chosen?"

"Once again, a complex answer. The majority are not chosen, indeed the large majority. And yet most are not irredeemable. In some cases they simply did not live long enough to be tested. I am referring to those killed by accidents or murder, those dying young of disease. In other cases, they were confused and struggling. Perhaps they could have picked a different path. However, they did not. This group is waiting. Some of them have been waiting a long time. After the Chosen join me in Heaven, those in waiting will be allowed another chance, beginning from birth, and will live again on Earth."

"You are describing what some believe to be reincarnation and others would call Purgatory."

"Only for some. For those worthy of another chance. There are some among you who have been here many times."

"And those who do return choose the right path in the next life?"

“Redemption is always more difficult than making the proper choices the first time. ”

“Are their souls among us?”

“Yes, but not as I described for the Chosen who stay. The others are near. The sensitives, whom I mentioned earlier, connect with them also. But the essences-in-waiting, the others, have a somewhat static essence. They have neither the knowledge of being chosen, nor the promise of returning to begin a new life. Their fate is to dwell endlessly on their completed lives.”

“You spoke of being restored to our earthly form. We will need our body in Heaven?”

“Yes. As I described, without the body, there are no senses and there is no input. That is as true in Heaven as it is here on Earth. But in Heaven the body is perfect. It does not age. There is no disease, no wearing down.”

“The last group? The irredeemable?”

“Fortunately, a very small number. They are gone. Their souls are…let me simply say…the molds are destroyed. They cease to exist.”

“I’m afraid I am a bit confused. If this is to be Judgment Day, what are the remaining souls waiting for?”

“The next visit.”

Reese was incredulous. “The *next* visit?”

“Of course, Reese. This is not my first, nor will it be my last.”

“How many? How many times have you come?”

“This will be the third.”

Reese dropped back into his chair, his mind racing. So much of what Elohim said explained so many things which had always burdened him. His role as the interviewer, as the one appointed to authenticate Elohim, was but a faint memory. He had become the student, Elohim the teacher. He struggled to remind himself of his purpose, his reason for being brought to this room.

“Reese, would you like a break?”

Stirred from his reverie, Reese answered, “No, thank you. Unless you require one?”

“Not at all.”

“I would prefer to continue.”

“As would I.”

“Very well, you said that you have done this twice before. Could you tell me more about the previous visits?”

“I have cultivated and nurtured mankind since your creation. This environment, Earth, was made to be a very dynamic structure, with constant change as the normal way of life here. You call it evolution, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest.”

“Then evolution does occur?”

“Yes, it is a part of the structure.”

“Did mankind evolve?”

“Yes and no. To explain…I created the sun, the Earth, and the other planets, giving them each a unique signature. If I had stopped at that point, your biologists believe that a soup of amino acids, randomly rearranging themselves over millions of years, would have eventually formed the first protein. From there, random and accidental processes would have continued to influence those proteins until the first amoeba sprang to life. Millions more years would be needed to accidentally create the next primitive form, and so on, until eventually men and women walked the Earth. This theory is based upon the belief that a million monkeys mindlessly pawing at a million typewriters for a million years, by sheer chance, would eventually write *Hamlet*. That is rubbish, and they are fools. There are millions of other planets in this galaxy alone that are as hospitable to life as Earth, equally as old, and have not yet produced that first protein.”

“But the fossil record! There is a clear progression of life on Earth with many species, such as the dinosaurs, becoming extinct.”

“Reese, when I created the flora and fauna of Earth, they were created to eventually support, sustain, and stimulate mankind. Had the epoch during which the dinosaurs dominated the planet not occurred, there would be no fossil fuel today.”

Reese groaned. “Oh, my.”

“Is there a concern in what I’ve told you?”

Chuckling, Reese explained, “There is a large segment of today’s population who will not be surprised to hear that it really is all about oil.”

“I am aware of that group, and you are correct. Reese, they will also not be able to tolerate the concept that all of creation was done for the benefit of mankind; they prefer to believe that you are simply another grubbing, rutting animal.”

“Certainly that belief, resisting the egocentrism of the past, is not a bad thing in and of itself, Elohim.”

“In fact, it is a very bad thing because the belief that you are special is accompanied by profound responsibilities. If you believe that you are unique and separate, you will strive to live up to that standard. If, on the other hand, you believe that you are qualitatively no different from the chimp, moose, or whale, you will have no internalized standard to live up to; you will be free to indulge in the primal. This group, to whom we both refer, takes great joy in seeing nobility in nature and none in mankind. They have gone beyond shrugging off egocentrism and have progressed to a destructive self-loathing.”

“Why?”

“Because self-hatred grants the one who feels it both freedom and power. Those who hold this belief do not feel that they belong on this planet or deserve a single resource. They believe that every apple they eat has been stolen from an animal that is far more deserving, that every breath they draw diminishes the quality of the environment. Reese, what does your training in psychology tell you happens within most people who hate themselves?”

“Transference.”

“Precisely. Your mind was not designed to hate itself; it consciously rejects that. The inevitable result of developing a philosophy of self-hatred is the turning of that hatred against mankind in general. Once you have transferred your hatred against others, you are free to set yourself up as their teacher and their judge. You decide what resources they may consume, where they may live, how much food and water they may have, how much they should weigh, what should be the source of their electricity, or whether they really even need electricity. You do all of this while proclaiming that you are setting the example of self-denial and self-improvement. Covering your body with brightly colored Spandex and pedaling your $7,000 bicycle

is neither self-denial nor self-improvement; it is merely a pathetic narcissism."

"It's true," Reese interjected, "that the basis of the narcissistic personality is a horrible self-image. But isn't there a contradiction in your statements? You said a moment ago that feeling special was good?"

"I was, perhaps, unclear. For that to be positive, people must feel part of a special group, a group which they place above themselves as individuals. The narcissists direct all feelings toward themselves. No one is above them, including me.

"Reese, I warned you in our first conversation how easy it would be to take a path of digression, as we have just done. To resume my answer to your question…all that has occurred in the past was to prepare this environment for mankind. The Earth was a garden designed specifically not only to feed mankind, but to provide it with the tools and the resources to advance to a great civilization. Achieving that goal required more than a supply of the basics; it also required trees for timber so that homes and other buildings could be built, minerals that could be converted into metals, fuels that could be used to power machines.

"All of those things would have been for naught if there were no mysteries for man to solve. As you have described so well in your lectures and books, once needs are met, mankind must have something more to strive toward. Those goals must be easy enough to be attainable and difficult enough to be challenging, or they will be abandoned out of frustration or boredom. Chemistry, the atom and the various subatomic particles, as well as the exploration of space, have impelled your breed forward over the centuries. The quest for answers has been so unrelenting that there have been many times throughout your history that additional layers of complexity have been added."

"Add additional layers, how so?"

"Remember, in your youth, you were taught that the atom was the fundamental particle?"

"Yes, I do."

"At that point in time, it was. There was nothing beyond it, no subatomic particles that together comprised an atom. I have always believed

that your species must never reach an end point of knowledge. To ensure the continued pursuit for knowledge and understanding, the makeup of your universe was modified to provide quarks and muons and neutrinos and the like. My task has been to make certain there has always been another frontier for mankind. It has been so for many thousands of years.

"As a result of the physical, emotional, and spiritual nourishment that you have received, your people have flourished."

"You make it sound as if we're a crop."

"In a very real way, you are. I created the garden, tended it as needed, and watched you grow and ripen. There is a point, a moment in time, when some of the fruits are at their ripest, while many of the others are not; several have long ago withered; and numerous others have begun to rot before ever fulfilling their promise. If the ripest of the fruit are not picked at that moment, the rot from the rest will overwhelm them, destroying them."

"That is why you are here."

"Yes. I have come to harvest those who have fulfilled their promise before they are lost, as I have done twice before."

"What becomes of the rest when the best are picked?"

"Are we still speaking in metaphors?"

"I prefer not."

"Very well. Mankind underestimates the powerful influence that the few exceptional members have on the whole. Even those who do not become leaders of state, but simply contribute within their own smaller sphere of the community, have a profound stabilizing and guiding effect on the rest. In the past, following my previous two visits, although I only took a small portion of the society, the civilization unraveled. It was almost as if those few whom I took were the anchor for the rest. Without that anchor they were blown and tossed and, in fact, destroyed. The same peoples who once built great cities and monuments are, today, barely able to farm their own lands."

"The disappearance of great civilizations in our distant past has never been explained."

"That is the sad explanation for many of the groups following two of the events. After the Chosen departed, the rest turned upon one another and

eventually upon themselves. Indulging in our garden metaphor for another moment, there was no need for the farmer to clear the crop and plow it under in preparation for the next planting."

"They did it to themselves."

"Yes, they did. And the reality of my coming became a legend, and the legend a distant myth."

"This only explains two of the downfalls? The others?"

"There were times that, as I watched, I realized the path mankind had picked would never produce any who could join me in Heaven. I intervened."

"Noah's flood?"

"That was one. He and his family were not the only Chosen to survive. As you now know, a genetic pool that small would not do well. I selected others throughout the world and asked them each to gather the plants and animals that I knew would not survive. And then I destroyed the rest."

"Set aside your seed stock and tilled the garden."

"Yes. There were other interventions, as well."

"Oh?"

"Your biologists are now concerned that, due to mankind's effort to increase efficiency, most of the varieties of corn have been lost. With essentially only one type remaining, they worry that a new disease which targets that specific subspecies would wipe it out, as has happened with the chestnut tree. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, a virus mutated into existence that nearly eliminated mankind itself. I took the survivors to a safe place, nurturing them until they multiplied, while creating some variations which I placed upon the Earth to join the family of humanity."

"Our races?"

"Indeed. Although the genetic differences are slight, they are sufficient to protect mankind from a single disease that would wipe it out completely."

"That explains why primarily only blacks are susceptible to Sickle Cell Anemia, the Jews to C.J. disease."

"And many others. I did not suspect at the time of the creation of these variations how controversial they would become. Yet, like so many other

conditions of your life on Earth, it gives each of you an opportunity to show your wisdom or your ignorance, your love or your hatred, your nobility or your baseness."

"You created them all equal."

"Reese, what is equality? Each person on Earth is different from the rest. I should say they all have the *potential* to be different. Men are also different from women. It is a source of great amusement to me that your people have looked to science in an attempt to prove the blaringly obvious. There are quantifiable physiological differences between the Asian, the black, the white. However, there are also differences among members of the same group. I am certain that you have white friends who are much taller than you, and others much shorter. You have known other whites much stronger or weaker. I doubt you have known any who are much smarter, while nearly everyone you have ever met is less smart, sometimes painfully so.

"Are you superior to the others because of your intellect? Of course you are…if intelligence is the criterion. To another person, height and strength may be all that matter. If you acknowledge that there are differences between men and women, then who is superior, and who is inferior? To decide that, you must place an objective value on each attribute and total them up. Is that possible?"

"It is for you."

"You are, of course, correct. When I judge, a few are chosen and the rest remain. There are no gray areas; there are no appeals. I will tell you this… all people born on Earth have the ability to become members of the community of Heaven. Whether they do so is their choice. Very few make the correct choice."

"Certainly you're not saying that everyone has an even chance; the serendipity of birth allows each of us to begin with great advantages or disadvantages."

"If my criterion were wealth or social success, you would be correct. I decide based upon the nature of developed individuals: their beliefs; their character; their inner strength; their nobility; their conviction that mankind, as a whole, is more important than they are as individuals; and their

conviction that there is a higher power. I also decide based upon their contributions to the whole. Camus was correct: a person cannot become a saint by only avoiding bad acts. Doing nothing wrong does not make you good; it only makes you a nebbish. To be good, you must *do* good. And by doing good, I am not referring to grand, visible charitable deeds. Having the privilege of looking directly into the hearts, minds, and souls of all, I can tell you that most who join the Peace Corps do so to feel superior to those they help. Most who devote a day helping to build a home – that will be given to a poor, homeless family – do so, if they are not seeking political gain, to atone for private sins. Not to mention that they are doing the homeless family no favor."

"No favor? Private sins? Please explain. How are we to place the whole above ourselves and not help those who are in need? And to what private sins do you refer?"

"The private sins come in a multitude of forms. Many find themselves in a life pattern that includes alcoholism, infidelity, mild or even extreme abusive behavior toward their families, or perhaps simply neglect. In time they regret their actions and their choices, but they do not have the courage, the discipline, or the desire to change their behaviors. Yet, all people like to be proud of themselves. You, as a psychologist, know that."

Reese nodded.

"It is a fundamental need. Unfortunately, most are not willing to live in a way that justifies that pride; they are not willing to give up the pleasures or patterns of behavior that diminish them. Instead, they believe they can earn the pride in self by doing grand, external deeds. A small example is a mother of a high school student who plays in the school band. Rather than supporting her daughter, attending every performance, encouraging her to practice, paying for and taking her daughter to private music lessons, the mother becomes a 'band mom,' sitting at a table away from the performances and selling T-shirts to raise money for the band. She abdicates her role and responsibilities as the child's mother, in favor of the attention and recognition that she receives from the band, the band director, and the other mothers. Reese, why don't you tell me her motives?"

Considering all of the overwhelming events that had occurred since Reese first met Elohim, this insignificant story profoundly affected him. It affected him because Melissa was in a band, and they had noticed the cult of band mothers all fawning over the director, having countless evening meetings to plan their events and paint their posters while leaving their own children at home alone. Claire, just last week, told Reese of a band mom selling T-shirts at the pre-season band camp performance. The woman's own daughter came to tears begging her mother for one of the shirts which her mother refused to buy. Claire, observing all of this, paid the seven dollars for a shirt and gave it to the weeping girl. The mother, seeing Claire give the shirt to her daughter, said, "I can't thank you enough. I would have bought it for her, but I just can't afford it." Claire just nodded and walked away. When she and Melissa were out of earshot, Melissa said, "Mom, that woman bought all of those T-shirts and donated them to the band." As they walked to the parking lot, Melissa pointed at a black Mercedes SUV and said, "That's her car! I think she could afford seven bucks!" Claire had been furious.

Elohim continued, "Reese, do you think that mother should join me as I leave?"

Reese looked up, startled.

"Forgive me for invading your privacy; however, I wanted to make a point. That mother was born with every advantage, and yet she became a despicable person."

"Not buying a T-shirt for your daughter doesn't make you despicable."

"No, in and of itself, it does not. But what your wife witnessed was not a mother exercising parental restraint to avoid spoiling her child. Claire witnessed a specific behavioral trait that was a symptom of character.

"You also asked for an explanation of my comment that the charity providing a free house for the homeless family does them no favor. Charity has long been touted as a cornerstone of being a good, religious person. The origin of that tradition has solid roots. In a small village where everyone was known to one another and, as a result of either character or peer pressure, everyone contributed to the welfare of the village to the best of his or her abilities, there occasionally came a disaster. It would take the form of

a family losing a mother in childbirth, a father becoming infirm or injured and unable to work, a home burning to the ground. The rest of the village would join together and take up the tasks of the deceased mother – feeding the children, cleaning the house, doing the family's laundry – so that the father was free to work. When a family lost a father, members of the village would take in the children and raise them, many times providing a place for the mother to stay. She, of course, was expected to work in the new abode. If a family home burned down, the village would join together and replace it, asking nothing in return.

"Today you have a society where everyone is not known to all. When you see people without a home, you do not know if they have been hard-working contributors to society or not. All too frequently, the recipients of the free house are people who were faced with all of the same choices that nearly all individuals encounter throughout their lives. As children they had a choice between watching television and doing their schoolwork; they chose television. As teens, they had a choice between doing household chores and going out with their friends; they chose their friends. As young adults they had a choice between getting a menial job and the option of going to college; they chose the job. They chose pregnancy over abstinence. They chose alcohol or drugs over sobriety. They chose sloth over personal grooming. They chose breaking the law over abiding by it. Over a period of twenty-five to thirty years, they consistently chose the path of immediate self-gratification or, at a minimum, the path of least resistance. During the same stages of life, others chose schoolwork over television, chores over friends, college over a job, abstinence over pregnancy, sobriety over drugs, and personal grooming over sloth.

"When people making sound choices need a place to call home, they will probably have a savings account, a steady occupation, and good credit. The people who made poor choices will probably have none of these things. I ask you, who *deserves* to have society provide them with a home?"

"If, by 'deserves,' you mean 'has earned,' the obvious answer would be the good citizen."

"Obvious perhaps, but incorrect. The correct answer is neither."

"Neither?"

“Yes, neither. The explanation as to *why* must begin with an understanding of what society is supposed to be. When the first nomadic family discovered that life could be easier by cooperating with another family, they formed a society. They made mutually agreed-upon rules that would reduce future friction between them, and they negotiated a system where they would each contribute to the whole, and each could expect the whole to provide certain things in return. It was then discovered that this system worked so well that a third family should be added; the rules were explained to the new ones, and the exchange of efforts and goods were negotiated. The society continued to grow, with each family contributing and each receiving value in return. Karl Marx understood this principle quite well.

“At some point the size of the society grew until one member, lacking in character, decided to reap the benefits of the society while shorting its members of his contribution. This was soon noticed by the others, and a meeting was held. The recalcitrant member was discussed, and the solution was obvious. The committee visited the slacker and expelled him from the community. Now, I ask you Reese, did the group have no human compassion?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Why are you not sure?”

“I do not know enough about why the one who was expelled did what he did.”

“And why must you know that?”

“To determine his….”

“Motives?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“In the story that I told, his motives are both obvious and irrelevant. I mentioned earlier that a village will gather around a citizen who is wounded or sick. They will protect him and help him until he recovers. This is also true with many pack animals. Except that, almost without exception, when it becomes obvious that the sick member will not soon recover, they will move on and leave him to die. Mankind, for the most part, throughout its history, has protected and nurtured the sick until the eventuality of death.

However, in the earlier story, I described the family that the village helped as one who had contributed up to the point of the disaster. In this story, the slacker *decided* to stop contributing. No calamity befell him. No illness affected his ability. He simply decided not to live up to his part of the bargain.

"Living in any society is an implied contract. Society will provide you with security, roads, water, and a multitude of miscellaneous infrastructure that any individual could not provide for himself. Society will also provide an environment that recognizes the realities of human nature and facilitates the individual's ability to contribute. That, by the way, is the part of the principle that Marx never did understand. In exchange for all that society provides, the members shall contribute. They shall partake in the education that is provided and excel within that framework to the best of their abilities. They shall seek a vocation and devote substantial energy to that vocation. They shall marry and have children. And when they have children, they shall pour every ounce of their love and energy and wisdom into each child they bear, to ensure that the child also grows to be a good citizen. When they have done all of that, they have fulfilled their obligation to society.

"It has taken a very long time to answer your question, at least partially. It is the obligation of the citizens to contribute to the perpetuation of society, which includes performing all of the tasks within their power. It is the obligation of society to provide those things that are beyond the power of the individual. Is obtaining a home for your family beyond your power?"

"Perhaps for some."

"I will clarify my question. Is obtaining a home for your family beyond the power of a member of society who has contributed, as I described earlier, throughout his or her life?"

"No."

"Then, is it the role of society to provide one?"

"I'd have to say 'no.' Yet, this all sounds so cold. Are we not to lend a hand? Is it not part of human nature to help the helpless?"

"You *are* to lend a hand. You *are* to help the helpless, if they are truly needy. Did you and Claire hesitate when Melissa's friend Sarah needed

help?"

Reese, still not accustomed to the depth of Elohim's insights, was again startled. "No. We did not hesitate."

"Of course you didn't. When members of your society have misfortune descend upon them, you and all like you will be quick to assist. That is good…that is noble…and that is one of the best parts of human nature. But when misfortune becomes institutionalized and conveying neediness becomes a practiced skill, 'lending a hand,' as you put it, becomes wrong.

"Have you studied Pavlov?"

"Of course."

"What did you learn from Pavlov?"

"That behavior which is rewarded is repeated."

"Precisely. If I were walking down the street and witnessed a small boy punching his sister, then approached the lad and offered him a dollar for each additional punch, would he stop hitting her? Reese, do you think there is a reasonable person on Earth who does not know that if you want people to stop behaviors, you punish them…if you want behaviors to continue, you reward them?"

"Probably not."

"If people, as a result of the choices they have made, have no money, no job, and no credit, should they be rewarded for this life they have created?"

"I would say not."

"There, finally, are the answers to your questions."

"What should society do, expel them?"

"In my example of the small ancient society, there was a place to banish them. There was unclaimed territory for the taking. Those who were expelled could begin their own society, and there were times that the lesson learned was sufficient; the outcasts created a society that thrived, even surpassed their former group. Today the Earth is completely covered with geopolitical territories. You cannot expel people from your society without exiling them to another and that, generally speaking, is not an acceptable solution."

"Again I ask, what should a society do?"

“If you were the parent of a child who stole cash, would you solve the problem by giving the child money?”

“No.”

“If you were the husband of an alcoholic, would you help your wife solve her problem by giving her a case of whiskey?”

“No.”

“If you were a teacher who caught a student cheating on a test, would you give the student an ‘A’?”

“No.”

“Why would you not do any of these things?”

“Because, as we discussed, it would reward bad behavior.”

“Then, Reese, would you have an established policy to deal with students who cheated?”

“I would expel them.”

“If we are to utilize this analogy to discover the best course of action for our homeless family, expulsion, as we discussed, is not an option.”

“I would penalize them with failing grades. I would provide them with a stringent regime of work that they must produce if they were to graduate. I would monitor them more closely than the other students.”

“And if they failed to produce the required work?”

“They would be failed.”

“But, Reese, what if they had come from disadvantaged homes? What if they had been abused as children? What if they were obviously malnourished?”

“I would send them to the campus psychologist for counseling, to the campus clinic for checkups and supplements. I would arrange for them to have access to meals. Perhaps I would even organize a group of the excellent students to help them, to mentor them and provide positive peer pressure.”

“And after all of that, what if they still did not produce the required work?”

“They would receive failing grades.”

“But why? Perhaps they were doing the best that they could.”

“They must fail; otherwise, the grades received by the others would have no value.”

“That may be true, but it is too abstract a concept for most. In fact, as long as the other students in the class received their earned grades, most would not care what you gave to the delinquent students. Suppose you announced to the class that because the failing students, for whom you and many of the others in the class had attempted to provide help, were somehow disadvantaged, it wasn’t their fault they couldn’t earn passing grades. To remedy this, you decided to lower all of the passing grades somewhat and give the accumulated points to the delinquents, so the ‘A’ student might receive a ‘B.’ How would the class react?”

“There would be a revolt, figuratively speaking. The vast majority of students jealously guard the grades they have earned. They would believe that they had chosen to work hard and earn their grades, and that those grades were theirs alone.”

“But wouldn’t they understand that the delinquent students needed help?”

“They wouldn’t care. They would be much harsher than I.”

“Aren’t these the same students who believe in a state that provides welfare?”

“Very much so.”

“Would they not understand that taking away a part of their hard-earned grades so that it might be distributed to those most needy would be the same as taking away a portion of their hard-earned salaries to support those who chose not to work?”

“I don’t believe they would make the connection.”

“As long as we are utilizing the thought experiment, I have another for you.”

“All right.”

“What would happen if at the beginning of this school year you announced that you would provide assignments, papers to write, workbooks to complete, and final exams – all of these things to be graded as they normally would. However, at the end of the semester, you would add all of

the grades together, divide them by the number of students in the class, and give all students this average grade?"

"Many of them would drop the class."

"Which ones would drop it?"

"The best students, the students who expected to get an 'A.'"

"Precisely. Now, further suppose they were prohibited from dropping the class. What would then be the result of this new policy?"

"I suspect the overall quality of work would diminish, especially from those same top students."

"It may amaze you to discover than many of them would do their work as well as they would under the former system. They would do so because of who they are. The standards they feel they must live up to are rock solid, not situational, and come from without."

"Without? I would have thought you would say that they were internal."

"The discipline and the fortitude to work hard and achieve are from within. The standards those students feel they must live up to are standards that come from the desire to fulfill their obligations to their parents, to society, to their God.

"You are correct, though. The overall quality of work would diminish substantially, to a degree that would be astounding. The average grade that you would award at the end of this hypothetical semester would be barely a 'D,' and possibly an 'F.' The reason for this is simply that it is human nature to wish to be recognized and rewarded for results, not effort. This is what I was referring to earlier when I mentioned the element that eluded Marx. He believed that a society could function 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.' He was very wrong.

"We have become sidetracked for quite some time now. You asked earlier how to place the whole above yourself. You do so by adding to the sum more than you take from it; it is that simple. If you are only able to contribute a little, then you must take less. To take less, you must need less. That is the answer."

Reese felt himself getting tired. So much had been discussed, so many revelations; his mind was verging on revolt. He decided upon one more question before calling it a night. "The stories and myths of your arrival are

dramatic and intense. It was not foretold, in anything that I have ever read, that you would arrive wearing brown loafers, Dockers, and a white button-down shirt, announcing yourself to the nearest government and submitting to endless questioning. It simply doesn't seem like your style."

Elohim laughed a deep and gentle laugh. "Even I am able to learn. My purpose is to bring the Chosen to Heaven. It is best if they arrive there relaxed and comfortable and, for many, joyous. Were I to arrive on a magnificent cloud and simply pluck them up, many of those, who have earned the right to sit at my side, would not be relaxed, comfortable, joyous or, in fact, happy to be chosen. I have found that it is better to arrive gently and discreetly. It is better to be joined by their leaders, both political and religious, in recognition of my presence and my purpose. It is better to inform them that they are of the Chosen and let them decide."

Chapter Eight

Lynn Sheffield arrived at National Airport tired and stiff. He refused to acknowledge the name Ronald Reagan National Airport, in fact, correcting the ticket agent in Tucson, and pretending not to notice when she rolled her eyes in response to his obstinacy. Washington, D.C. was apparently having a hot day, Sheffield noticed as he glanced out the window next to the jetway. The air was shimmering above the tarmac, but it was cool and comfortable, almost chilly, in the air-conditioned terminal.

He had not made reservations for a place to stay upon his arrival, simply arranging for a rental car. None of the rental companies had a hybrid available, much to his chagrin, so Lynn settled for a small, two-door Kia that boasted MPG in the mid-forties. It took twenty minutes for his luggage to slide from the gap in the ceiling down the ramp to the conveyor. Hoisting the two heavy duffel bags, Sheffield swung around to head for the car rental booth, when he abruptly slammed into a gray-haired man in a dark suit. Before he had an opportunity to apologize, two younger dark-suited men, who had been in the process of grabbing their luggage, suddenly descended upon Lynn, each grabbing one of his arms.

"Hey!" Sheffield shouted. "What's the deal?"

"Calm down," one of the two said as they walked him away from the older gentleman.

Instead of taking that advice, Sheffield started to flail, trying to use his duffel bags as bludgeons. "Let me go, assholes!" Their grips were too firm for him to be effectual. The two continued walking Lynn to the exit doors in the opposite direction of the rental booth. All Sheffield could do was shout, which he did loudly.

As they reached the exit, a uniformed airport security officer, seeing the two men escorting Lynn, approached. "What's the problem here?"

The men stopped walking and so did Lynn, having no choice. One of the strangers said, "This man assaulted the Archbishop."

"What?" yelled Sheffield. "I swung my bags off the belt and accidentally hit the guy. I didn't even have a chance to say I was sorry before these two goons grabbed me."

The guard looked at the bodyguards who both shrugged. “I’ll take it from here,” he said. Releasing their grips on Sheffield slowly, watching to see if he was planning a dash back to the Archbishop, the two men turned and walked away. The security officer said, “Please come with me for a few minutes.”

“Why? I didn’t do anything.”

“Look, Mr. ….”

“Sheffield, Lynn Sheffield.”

“Mr. Sheffield, the security officers for the local diocese believe that you assaulted the Archbishop. They didn’t mention pressing charges….”

“Pressing charges? I bumped the guy! Is that an offense now? If it is, there are about five people on my flight I’d like to prosecute.”

“Please come with me to the security office to fill out some paperwork; it’ll just take a few minutes. I’m just doing my job, Mr. Sheffield.”

“That’s what the….”

“I know,” said the officer wearily, “that’s what the Nazis said.”

Lynn stopped arguing, realizing what was happening. “You’re just going to keep me with you for a while until Mr. Archbishop and his goons are gone, aren’t you?”

Pausing for a moment, the officer decided candor might be the best approach. “Yes, I am. I do need to fill out an incident report, though.”

“I don’t see you detaining those guys for your stupid report.”

“I know where to reach them. I don’t know anything about you.”

Figuring out that he was going to get nowhere with this argument, Lynn capitulated, “All right. All right.” Sticking his hands forward and expecting a laugh, he asked, “Wanna handcuff me?”

The security officer instead asked, “Should I?”

Angry and frustrated, Sheffield said, “Let’s go.”

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Archbishop Coughlin stared silently out the window of the limousine. The minor altercation at the airport forgotten, he was thinking about the

phone call that resulted in this sudden trip back to Washington, D.C. The Director of the FBI, Bill Burke, had been a parishioner and friend of the Archbishop for many years. 'It's probably a good thing we have that history,' the priest thought, considering the topic of the call. After speaking with Burke, Coughlin notified Rome in very sketchy terms, had his staff book a flight home, and ended his vacation in Vancouver early. It had been a long, grueling flight, yet he was anything but weary.

Reaching for the cradled cell phone built into his armrest, Coughlin called Burke, dialing his direct line. The Director answered on the first ring. "Hello, Kerry."

"Hello, Bill. I wanted to let you know I'm in town. We're driving in from Reagan now. Has anything changed?"

"Only for the worse – or better, depending on your perspective. Johnson finished his second interview with our visitor and then immediately left with his wife for the night. They should be in their room at the Watergate by now. The second interview didn't really yield any bombshells; it was more philosophical than anything from what I understand. The transcript is being e-mailed to me shortly."

"What did you mean by 'worse or better'?"

"Our friend was quite candid with Johnson about several things. Apparently, he is here to fulfill the prophecy of the Judgment Day."

"The End of Days?"

"Well, that's where it gets a little strange. He told Johnson that the Book of Revelation was a bit overblown and exaggerated. There will not be any fire and brimstone, no great cataclysm. He is simply here to collect the Chosen, as he calls them."

"There has always been some controversy as to the authenticity of Revelation. Many who have studied it have been convinced that, shall we say, artistic license was used a bit too heavily. So what, according to our guest, becomes of the non-chosen?"

"Nothing. They just remain here to continue their lives."

"Well, Bill, that is certainly a more benign God than our Old Testament scriptures describe."

“I’m not so sure about that. He told Doctor Johnson that when the few who are chosen are removed, their absence is profound, leading to chaos and an eventual disintegration of the society.”

“I’m surprised that he would be inclined to share the future with us.”

“Oh, no, it isn’t the future; it’s the past. I hadn’t mentioned that to you. He has been here and done this twice before.”

“Twice before! That cannot be. It isn’t written….” The Archbishop faded off in mid-sentence, scouring his lifetime of readings for a clue.

“Reese Johnson seems to think that the previous visits would explain the mysterious collapses of societies in the past.”

“I don’t know, my friend. It is obvious that I must speak with him. He is clearly an imposter.”

“Kerry, the man has healed the lame, caused objects to appear from nothing, and, as I told you earlier, he knows things that no one knows.”

“Bill, I know. But there must be some other explanation. This is not how our God would come.”

“If you already have reservations, you’ll have more when you read the transcripts. If he is God, he is a harsh God, a cold God.”

“What do you mean?”

“Much of what I have been taught, by my parents and in church, about caring for the helpless and downtrodden…he seems to be saying they deserve their lot.”

Both men were silent for a full minute. Finally the priest spoke. “Will the transcripts be at my office?”

“Yes. I’ve sent the pages I already have and will forward the rest to you as I get them.”

“Very well. I’ll read them tonight, and we’ll speak in the morning.” Pausing a moment, the Archbishop asked, “According to our guest, will there be a morning?”

“It appears so. He has told Johnson that he is in no rush. He apparently wants the world’s political and religious leaders to call a press conference to endorse him.”

Coughlin snorted, “That will never happen.”

“He appears confident that it will. He’s willing to take the time to convince all of us.”

“Has he convinced you, Bill?”

Burke hesitated. Not wanting to concern his friend and mentor, he also did not want to betray his true feelings. “Kerry, I don’t know.”

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Reese lay face up on the hotel bed, staring at the ceiling. Claire was tucking the last of the clothes she had packed into a dresser drawer. After leaving the interrogation room, during the drive to the Watergate and the process of checking in, Reese had not felt like talking. Claire was always sensitive to him and respected his desire for silence. She knew that he would talk soon enough.

“Honey,” he asked softly, “do you believe he is God?”

Without hesitation, she answered, “Yes. Don’t you?”

“I think I’m pretty much there. In some ways he is so godlike, in the ways that I’ve always imagined. Yet, in others, he’s not.”

“Are you having trouble believing that God can be a pragmatist?”

Reese laughed. She always had a way of cutting through the crap. “I guess I am.”

“Reese, He’s God, not Santa Claus.”

א

It was nearly midnight before Lynn Sheffield found a motel on the outskirts of Burke, Virginia. At least, he thought, it was not a fleabag. It was a national chain, the standard two-story layout with parking right outside the first-floor room doors. The room was clean, and the bed smelled okay.

As Sheffield stripped down and climbed into the shower, he realized that his anger was still unabated. It had started smoldering in the parking lot with Johnson and the FBI jerks, then burst into flames after the aborted demonstration at the U of A campus, and escalated into an inferno at the airport. The fury clouded his judgment and shortened his breathing.

It seemed to Lynn that all of his worst fears, springing forth when “his” President left office and was replaced by this born-again fanatic, were

coming true. He had watched as the mindless superstition called "religion," for the last seven years, had systematically crept back into every aspect of his life. Victories that had been won decades ago were being rolled back, one by one. The FCC was trying to strip the hard-earned freedom of speech from the radio and television stations, and return Americans to the "stone age" of the 1950s. The enlightenment which had taken decades to instill within the federal courts, and even the Supreme Court, was being chiseled away by appointment after appointment, returning the country to the knee-jerk, so-called conservatism of the past. Even the right to an abortion was in danger.

Lynn Sheffield saw himself as a man of reason and logic. Science, throughout the history of mankind, had pulled back the curtain of ignorance and replaced blind, unthinking faith with knowledge and understanding. It had dispelled destructive myths and allowed those who dared to be different to feel free to join society at last. Religion was the giant green face exhorting us to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Sheffield's agenda, and the agenda of his ilk, had been to expose that man behind the curtain who called himself "god," because the god of the born-agains and the god of the churches and the god of this stupid, provincial country's President was an evil god. He had to be an evil god if he allowed all the travesties that had occurred to be done in his name.

Lynn did not have to go back in his mind as far as the Crusades or the Inquisition to find sufficient offenses to outrage him. It was in the name of god that blacks were excluded from society. After all, man was made in *his* image and *he* was not black, so the blacks must not be fully man. It was in *his* name that women were subjugated by men and regarded as property, unworthy of even walking into a Catholic church without covering their heads. The word of god had been used to justify the endless, self-perpetuating cycle of violence that gripped the world – "an eye for an eye," indeed. Perhaps the worst offense, the most grievous in Sheffield's mind, was the belief among so many that America was somehow blessed by god, and therefore was sanctioned to carry out its imperialism and adventurism. A real god would bless no country, Sheffield thought, no race, no gender, no

one religion or people. If there was a god, and Lynn did not think there was, he would bless everyone with no exceptions.

Continuing his mental tirade, Sheffield thought that god had been an expedient excuse, an elaborate rationale, and a club with which to beat people into submission. It had been people, not god, who imposed god's judgment upon them. It had been people who condemned the woman who dared to have a child without first having the church-sanctioned and church-defined marriage. People had condemned a loving relationship between two men, depriving them of the privileges of a marriage. It was people who declared the Taliban and Al-Queda to be godless groups, simply because they reacted to America's effort to dominate the world. And once godlessness had been ascribed, America could attack. Only the so-called god-fearing countries joined the attack; the enlightened nations of the world attempted to stop the madness.

People decided, time and time again, what god would not approve of – imposing their edicts upon all of humankind, as if they actually came from some divine being. Those days must end. Humans must reach a point where all of these crutches would be thrown away, all of these beliefs would be eradicated, and all who continued to spew this hatred in the name of love would be silenced once and for all.

Sheffield noticed his skin was wrinkling from the time in the shower. Not remembering whether he had soaped and rinsed, he turned off the water, dried himself, and went to bed to sleep a troubled sleep.

Chapter Nine

Reese and Claire had arrived early at the Hoover Building, anxious to begin the day, when Reynolds stopped them in the hallway. “You might as well hold up for a while.”

“Why?” asked Claire. “Is something wrong?”

Reynolds’ face was impassive. “No. The Director has decided to insert another person into the process now, instead of waiting until you are done.”

Reese spoke up, “Who? Why?”

Before Reynolds could answer, two Catholic priests, followed by the Archbishop, who was attired in full vestments, walked up to the group. The Archbishop, addressing Reese, said, “Doctor Johnson. It is indeed a pleasure to meet you.”

“It is my pleasure, Your Excellency. This is my wife, Claire, and this is Special Agent Nicholas Reynolds.” Coughlin shook each of their hands and introduced the young priests as Father James and Father McGonigle. After the formalities ended, Reese asked, “I assume that you are here in an official capacity?”

“Yes and no. William Burke is an old and dear friend. When he shared the details of this gentleman’s visit, of course my curiosity was piqued. He asked if I would take some time to talk with our guest, and I immediately agreed.”

“So I am to assume that Rome is not yet aware of this story.”

“Quite the contrary, I spoke with Cardinal Bonavente last evening. He has yet to confer with His Holiness, but saw no reason why I should not come here and meet this remarkable man. So tell me, Doctor Johnson, what is your opinion of him and the claims that he has made?”

Reynolds interrupted, “Perhaps we should move this discussion out of the hallway and into a private room.”

The Archbishop, seeming to have forgotten that Reynolds was there, turned to him and said, “Actually, I’m afraid I have limited time.” Turning back to Reese, he excused himself. “Perhaps we could postpone our talk to a more agreeable time?”

"Yes, of course, Your Excellency."

"Then I'd best get to this. Agent Reynolds, was it?…Yes…could you direct me to our mysterious guest?"

Gesturing toward the door they were standing near, Reynolds said, "He's right through there."

"Thank you, sir. Doctor Johnson, will you be joining us?"

"Please go ahead. I'll be right in."

"Very well." The Archbishop turned and paused while one of the young priests opened the door; then they all entered the outer room of the interrogation area.

After the door closed, Claire said, "I did *not* like him!"

"Neither did I," said Reynolds.

Reese, chuckling, added, "I'm not exactly a fan myself."

"Let's get in there," said Claire, reaching for the doorknob. "I don't want to miss anything."

Father James and Father McGonigle entered the interrogation room first, followed by Coughlin. Elohim rose from his seat and reached out to shake the hand of each of the young priests. Reese could see through the glass that Elohim's touch was having the same effect on each of them that it had twice on him. Reese saw Coughlin extend his hand to Elohim, not in the manner of a traditional handshake, but as a lady offers her hand to be kissed. Elohim just stared at the Archbishop, making no effort to take his hand. After an uncomfortable moment, Coughlin dropped his hand back to his side.

Through the speaker above the window, Reese and the others could hear Elohim say to the priests, "I am honored, my children, to meet both of you. I have some matters to discuss in private with your archbishop. If you would be so kind as to leave us, I would be most appreciative."

The two looked at Coughlin, who nodded. They turned and left the room, closing the door behind them. At the exact moment they walked through the door into the observation area, joining Reese, Claire, McWilliams, and Reynolds, the speaker above the window began to produce a hissing sound. McWilliams immediately reached for the phone,

calling the techs in the control room. The technician reported that they were still receiving the video, but that their audio feed had also been lost.

"I understand that you wish to be called Elohim?"

"Please have a seat, Kerry," Elohim said, ignoring Coughlin's question and seating himself.

The Archbishop lowered himself into the seat across. "Please, sir, my title is Archbishop or, if you prefer, Your Excellency."

"Why have you come here today?"

Coughlin was taken aback by the directness in Elohim's voice and the piercing stare from his eyes. He responded, "I was asked by William Burke to speak with you."

"I am aware of that. What confounds me is why you would accept."

"Why, he is a friend, a friend in need."

"You are correct that he is in need. What you do not state is that your friend is in need because you have failed him, as you have so many others."

"I don't understand. And besides, I have questions to ask you."

"I have no answers for your questions and never will. However, I will explain, if you truly do not understand, exactly how you failed your friend."

Kerry Coughlin was off-balance. This was certainly not a direction that he expected this interview to take. "Please do explain."

"You hold the position of an archbishop in the Catholic Church. Your diocese includes Washington, D.C., perhaps the most powerful city on Earth. You, more than most, should realize the tremendous responsibilities your position entails. In the seminary you were taught of the trials and tribulations of the early believers of your faith. Many were stoned to death merely for allowing their belief to become known. Others were put in a ring with gladiators and told that if they renounced their faith, they would live. Most did not renounce; all who did not died a horrible death. Throughout the early years of Catholicism, in many parts of this world, to be Catholic meant to be persecuted or ostracized. It took this country nearly two hundred years to permit a Catholic to be President.

"The believers in your religion have a long and noble history of resisting, in some cases, massive pressure to abdicate their faith, including the threat of torture and death. You, sir, have sold out the very basic tenets

of your Church, not because you feared for your life, not because you had succumbed to torture, but simply so that you would be liked."

Coughlin sat hypnotized by Elohim's voice and the message it conveyed. He was speechless. Elohim continued, "As the archbishop of this diocese, you not only had your parishioners to lead, but you also had many who held positions of great power look to you for guidance. In their times of darkest personal need, when they were at a crossroads and desperately needed your help to make a wise decision, needed a solid foundation of faith to comfort them on a difficult but righteous path, you chose to forsake those standards that had been taught to you from the time you were a small boy. You, in your infinite wisdom, believed that you could pick and choose which of the commandments were to be followed and which could be ignored. You, with your ultimate hubris, could supersede the Holy See and tell a sinner that his sin was not a sin at all. How can I judge a man for his sins if he sought out my representative on Earth for counsel and forgiveness, for guidance and a firm reminder of what his Creator expects of him, and that representative told him that he needn't worry…that his transgressions were not offensive to God, that the sinful act that he contemplated was not a violation of the rules of his faith.

"Kerry Coughlin, many years ago you were seduced – not by a woman, but by the power and prestige that reflects onto you from the famous and influential. You decided that you must make certain never to express displeasure or disapproval at what you were told, that you were never to advise the powerful to abandon their courses of action, no matter how imprudent. You decided that you must never find fault with members of this elite group or you might simply be ignored by them from that point on. Your predecessors had the strength of their convictions to die for their beliefs…you did not have the courage within yourself to risk missing the next Washington party.

"As I mentioned, because you held this position in this city, you had an even greater responsibility than your colleagues. The leaders of this country have been forced by events to make truly difficult and monumental decisions that affect the lives of millions. There have been innumerable times when those who came to you for guidance could have been reminded

of the teachings of my Son, could have been steered away from the hysteria of the moment and reminded of the wisdom of the faith. Instead of teaching them, instead of guiding them, instead of inculcating them with the wisdom and mercy of your faith, you pandered to them. You made your choice…and you chose to be a sycophant rather than a moral leader. You could have changed history for the better. You could have helped so many stay on the righteous path or perhaps even find it for the first time. You could have given many of the leaders of the world the strength to do that which is right. Those opportunities are lost forever, as are the nearly countless souls that you, personally, have deprived of a place in Heaven."

Coughlin finally found his voice to protest, "It cannot all be my doing. Surely each and every man or woman is responsible for his or her own choices."

"You are correct, Kerry. Each and every man or woman who lives chooses a personal path, just as every captain chooses his own route across the sea. Yet, in troubled times, when there is a storm and the seas are tossed, even the best of captains need a lighthouse so they may avoid the rocks and shoals that are hidden from them by the tumult. My beloved Son came to Earth to create your Church so that it could be a beacon for the lost to follow. He believed that at times some of mankind would need a haven…a place where they could feel His love and be nurtured, while also being reminded of what it is to be a good man or woman, reminded of that which would lead them to Heaven. That has been your only task, Kerry, and you have failed. You have failed your flock…you have failed me…and you have failed my Son."

The Archbishop slowly crumbled in his chair, his eyes downcast, his shoulders slumped. The truth of Elohim's words struck deeply into his heart. Soon he began to weep, the sobs racking his frame. Elohim watched and said nothing. After a time, the sobbing ceased. Coughlin, still looking down, asked in a shaky voice, "What is to be for me?"

To answer, Elohim slowly reached across the table and firmly gripped the broken man's hands. There was no joy in this touch. Coughlin was instantly filled with fear, pain, and self-loathing. Oceans of each emotion crashed over him, devastating him and continuing until Elohim lifted his

hands, stopping the flow. The moment Coughlin was released, he collapsed forward onto the table, his breathing ragged. Leaning forward, until his lips were inches from Coughlin's ear, Elohim whispered, "That is what is to be for you."

Reese and the others watched the entire silent drama unfold, unsure of what to do. After Elohim removed his touch and Coughlin collapsed, the hissing suddenly stopped. Elohim looked at the window and, clearly addressing the two priests, said, "Come and get your friend. He needs you."

As Father James and Father McGonigle hurried into the room, Elohim said to them, "Remove this man from my sight."

Father James asked, "Is he hurt? Did he have a heart attack?"

Elohim replied, "Yes, he is hurt. And he shall continue to feel the pain of his betrayal for the rest of his years."

As Coughlin was slowly walked out of the room, McWilliams asked him, "Your Excellency, are you okay?"

Coughlin slowly raised his eyes to look at the agent and said nothing. McWilliams could see an overwhelming pain and sadness in his eyes before they were cast downward once again. Reese edged around the group and entered the room with Elohim.

More questioning than accusatory, Reese asked, "What did you do?"

Elohim replied, "I held up a mirror revealing an image which could not be ignored or denied. Kerry Coughlin saw himself as he was for the first time."

Reese, seating himself across from Elohim, asked, "Am I to assume that Kerry Coughlin received his judgment prematurely?"

"Let me just say that in Kerry Coughlin's mind, his final judgment is a foregone conclusion." Leaning back in his chair and visibly relaxing, Elohim asked, "Reese, are you here this morning to resume our discussion?"

"I am."

"Then, please, let us continue."

"I am sure that you disabled the speaker to provide yourself and the Archbishop…."

“Please do not refer to that man as an archbishop. He does not deserve that privilege.”

“All right, you obviously wanted privacy for your time with him. Without violating that privacy, may I ask if his offense was a failing of the Church, for which you held him responsible, or was it a personal failure?”

“You may ask and I will answer. Kerry Coughlin’s failure was personal. It was a weakness of character that prevented him from fulfilling his duties within the Church. I believe there is more to your question than simply curiosity about Mr. Coughlin. You are curious about my view of the role of the Church. Am I right?”

“Yes. I know many people, some of them quite good people, in my opinion, who believe in a higher being, who may believe in the teachings of the Church, but who do not believe that it is necessary to participate in the institution to be a good person. I am, of course, also curious as to your preference for one religion over another.”

“Have you ever had a friend who became an alcoholic?”

“Yes, some years ago. To stop you for a moment, though…yesterday you mentioned Sarah, Melissa’s friend, whom Claire and I helped when her father developed ALS. You knew that fact from my life. Do you not know this fact, as well?”

“It is indeed a pleasure to have this conversation with someone who is attentive and who thinks. Thinking, by the way, is a trait I will address shortly to answer your other question. Yes, I do know the fact…a college roommate of yours named Jimmy Lesch was the friend to whom you refer. It is best, if we are to have a fruitful conversation, to allow me the tactics that I employ. They are intended to bring the memories to your mind so that you may better understand.”

“I see. I am sorry to interrupt. Please continue.”

“Did Jimmy ever escape his problem with drinking?”

“He did. He has been sober for fifteen years.”

“Did he escape this problem alone?”

“No. He eventually joined Alcoholics Anonymous and has been a member ever since.”

“Would anyone have thought less of him if he had changed his path without that help?”

“Of course not…and I see your point. The Church is there to help us if we need it.”

“Indeed. My goal for all of my children is for them to reach a certain point, to become, within their lifetimes, worthy of joining me in Heaven. If they can reach that goal on their own, they will become members of the Chosen. If, for example, because of the accident of an unfortunate birth to evil parents, they lose their way and are in need of the help that we discussed yesterday, the Church is there. That was the dream of my Son.”

“Is the Catholic Church the church that you…?”

“Endorse?”

“I suppose that would be the word.”

“I endorse the Catholic Church because it sprang from my Son’s teachings. Nearly all of the Protestant churches sprang from the Catholic, and each has merit, as well. It is a part of man’s nature to avoid limitations. There are times when that particular trait is positive and times when it is not. It is the basic desire to actualize oneself which has caused many of your people to reach great heights. To do so, they had to cast off the limiting ties their society had imposed. Many of the Protestant faiths arose as an alternative to the strict rules of the Catholic Church, rules that many felt were not my will. These offshoots allowed their clergy to marry, allowed divorce; today some go even further to demonstrate their tolerance.”

“Do you have a problem with the direction they are going?”

“It troubles me to see a movement within a church change beliefs that have been held for a thousand years. Perhaps some, I believe very few, of the rules needed to be changed. And that change should only accommodate a society which is no longer structured as it once was. It was not my intent to exclude women from taking an equal role as parishioners, nor was it the intent of my Son. However, when rules are changed as a result of fear – fear of public criticism, fear of losing the members of your flock – those changes are ill-advised because they tend to pander to the baser instincts and urges of the population.

“All of this is not to say that the Catholic Church or all of the Protestant faiths no longer perform their original function, to provide help, guidance, and support for those who wish to find their way to Heaven.”

“And Judaism?”

“As I explained, Catholicism, and Christianity in general, sprang from my Son and His life and teachings. Judaism predates Christianity by many years. I am the Creator described by the Christians. I am also the Creator described by the Jews. That, they have in common. In recent centuries Judaism has transformed from being simply a religion to encompassing a philosophy for living on Earth. Regardless of this change, it still serves to deliver many of the flock to me.”

“Does it bother you that they did not accept Jesus as your Son?”

“Bother me? No. I am afraid, Reese, that you do not understand me yet. I placed mankind upon this Earth to multiply and, hopefully, to produce some among you who are fit to become members of the Chosen. Much like the farmer who casts his seeds, I reap that which grows and ripens. The farmer does not despise the seeds that never germinate, nor does he despise the fruit that never ripens; he is merely saddened. I love all who come into existence because each has the potential to join me. I do not care which path you may choose to arrive in Heaven. I do not condemn those who are not chosen.”

“Elohim, you have described to me the fate of the irredeemable. That fate sounds like condemnation to me.”

“Our misunderstanding is a result of semantics. I simply choose who has earned the privilege to spend eternity in Heaven and who has not. Nearly all of those who are not fit are allowed to continue to have a chance at redemption. Among the non-chosen, there are a few for whom continuation is pointless. An example of such a person would be a cold-blooded murderer. An infinite succession of lifetimes can never remove that stain upon the soul. They do not continue.”

“Elohim, what of Islam? They have nearly a billion followers.”

“There was a time when the Muslims believed that I was Allah. To many I still am. When the Chosen are known, several of the Islamic belief shall be among them. Over the centuries, their institutional beliefs have

changed. Their clerics no longer shepherd their flock to the gates of Heaven, but to a different place. The Heaven they seek is not my Heaven."

Reese pondered all that he had learned. In some ways Elohim seemed much harsher than the God of Reese's beliefs, yet in other ways more benign. Reese could not help but acknowledge that his reasoning was sound and, as Claire pointed out, he was not Santa Claus. Suddenly, Reese was embarrassed by his thoughts. It seemed arrogant to judge Elohim's wisdom.

"You are not an arrogant man, Reese Johnson." Startled, Reese looked up to see Elohim smiling. "It is your duty and your right to question, to understand."

"It feels…sacrilegious to question you."

"It has never bothered you before. Why should it now that you are sitting with me? There is a difference between faith and blind faith. You are not the type of man to take anything on blind faith. Once your reasoning has led you to the conclusion that faith is the answer, you will abide by that faith; until that point you will continue to question."

Sheepishly, Reese muttered, "I hope that's a good thing."

Elohim replied, "It is the best thing. Now, do you have more to ask?"

"Yes," answered Reese, once again composing his thoughts. "Why now? Why have you chosen this particular time to come?"

"I believe I touched on the answer yesterday. After my last visit, the people were plunged into a very dark time. It was a time for all to experience the consequences of their actions. Slowly, there emerged a few who rose above the rest and began to lead. The leaders to whom I refer were not heads of state; instead, they each led a small group: a congregation of faithful, the members of a private society, a tribe, a neighborhood, or an enclave. And it was an enlightened leadership born from the lessons learned from the past. Since goodness and righteousness will always spread, just as does evil, these small groups each produced more leaders, who then attracted more followers. As the depth of their convictions grew, and as the goodness was spreading through the world, evil was also spreading and growing, finding its own adherents. I am saddened to tell you that, at times like these, evil has the advantage.

“As I watched all of this, I recalled the long and wretched journey mankind took between my first visit and the second. There were times, then, that I did not believe I would ever see another man or woman on Earth who would be fit to be chosen. It appeared that it was all going to happen again, perhaps worse. It was at that moment my Son asked if He could come here and tip the scales, ever so slightly, toward the good.

“His influence far exceeded His own expectations and has lasted for two thousand years. Before He came, there were those who were intrinsically good, yet had no map to follow. He showed them the way. His effort brought humanity toward the light, the path.

“It is the natural cycle of mankind to struggle toward a higher state of being. As you have written and taught, after society reaches the highest plateau it can reach on its own, a disintegration begins to occur, leading to an eventual collapse. If I wait too long, the collapse will destroy many who were worthy. If I arrive too early, then all who might have attained the goal would not have had the time to do so.”

Elohim paused. Heavily resting his elbows on the table, he leaned forward. “That optimum moment is now.”

Reese’s mind was filled with a vague yet powerful image of humanity teetering on the brink, struggling to maintain an equilibrium. His voice subdued, he said, “As you mentioned, Elohim, I have come to the conclusion that as mankind reaches the highest tier, it will lose its way, almost turn on itself. I have ascribed that tendency to the abandonment of religion or at least to the abandonment of the belief in something higher than the self. But I’ve never been sure why it happens.”

“Reese, have you ever witnessed the raising of children taught that if they work hard, do everything that is expected and do it well, and always follow the rules, the reward for this effort is inevitable?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I have.”

“What happens to those young adults the first time they encounter reality, the first time the job they seek is awarded based upon politics or pettiness rather than merit?”

“They tend to be more devastated than the normal person in the same situation.”

“And if their first several attempts to apply this philosophy to life all end badly?”

“They become bitter and disillusioned.”

“As a psychologist, haven’t you discovered that nearly all sociopaths began their lives in that way?”

“Actually, yes.”

“And your definition of a sociopath?”

“Someone who is totally self-absorbed and completely lacks empathy for others – in fact, appears to lack the ability to empathize.”

“Are all sociopaths high-profile?”

“No. Most of the notable killers in our culture are sociopaths, but practicing therapists all have a significant number of their patients pegged as such. There are many sociopaths walking among us.”

“You mentioned killers…does a woman who kills her unfaithful husband tend to be a sociopath? Is the robber who kills the store clerk?”

“Typically the wife is.”

“Why is that?”

“Because infidelity occurs in many marriages. In the vast majority of those cases, the injured party simply leaves. For the spouse to kill because she has been betrayed, she must deem an offense against herself as higher in value than the life of the other person. With the robber, it depends. If the robber is wearing a mask, arrives on foot, has no reason to believe that the clerk can identify him, yet kills the clerk anyway, then he probably is a sociopath.”

“What is the distinction?”

“This type of sociopath kills for no apparent reason other than minor inconvenience or insignificant slights. I once studied a killer who murdered his waiter because he served his cheeseburger without cheese.”

“So, Reese, enlarge your micro observations to the macro. As mankind moves up the tiers, man is taught that if he finds a cave and kills the tiger that lives within, he may have a place to live. The cave is found, the tiger is killed, and the man immediately has a home, as well as a few meals. At the next tier, man is told to till the land, plant the seed, provide water, and food will grow. The distance between the investment of time and the receipt of

reward is substantially extended; yet, man believes, and soon a steady supply of food arrives. At the following tier, he is told that if he bands together with others, all will share the work, share the food, take turns guarding the camp, and life will be better. This time the reward is slightly amorphous, and not quite as dependable, as he discovers that some of the other men fall asleep during guard duty. He also discovers that no matter how conscientiously they guard, a stronger group occasionally breaks through. The guard is increased until a relatively comfortable stage of security is reached.

"This pattern continues through time with each tier offering a reward that is less immediate, less tangible, and less certain, until we reach today. The demands were much simpler in the past – kill a tiger, get its cave. The demands now begin at birth and continue unrelentingly until adulthood. Man must work on his appearance, his strength, his wardrobe, his vocabulary, his level of education and obtaining it from the 'right' source, his choice of spouse, his mode of transportation, his ownership of the latest cell phone, and his choice for a career. All he is offered in exchange is happiness.

"The disconnect between effort and reward has grown wider with each tier until the distance is so extreme that it is nearly impossible to see the end. This has happened at the same time that the reward has become so nebulous that it is almost imperceptible. The result, for many, is to believe that this promise is, indeed, a lie. And since this has been the most fundamental of promises, coming directly from the mouths of those whom we should love and trust the most, our own parents, then everything must be a lie. When a person reaches that point mentally, he has become the sociopath we described.

"Sociopaths, by definition, do not contribute to society. They contribute to nothing but themselves, and they take from society all that they can. The continued functioning of the group becomes a heavier and heavier burden on those who do contribute, until one of two things happens. For some, they simply give up, overwhelmed and exhausted. For the rest, they join the other side, taking as much as they can while there is still something to take. When a society has reached that moment in time, a total disintegration

occurs. Soon the government fails; the military then becomes leaderless and at best ineffective, at worst mercenary. Chaos and lawlessness follow. In the past, Reese, I have seen that as many as nine people out of ten do not survive."

Reese responded, "I understand how all of this can happen. It is hard for me to fathom how you could allow it to happen."

"What would you have me do? Leave some of the Chosen behind so they may continue to attempt to lead and to teach? Would that be fair to them? It would only delay the inevitable, and only slightly at that. Reese, my son, I have already explained that this disintegration is already beginning, and that there is nothing which can be done to stop it. All I can do is save the Chosen before it becomes too late for them."

"There is nothing that *you* can do to prevent it?"

"You mean Elohim, the great Creator, the great God, should save the people from themselves."

"Yes. You sent your Son here before. He made a difference."

"My Son made a difference at a time that was two thousand years before the disintegration. Times have changed, Reese. If my Son were to walk the Earth today, how would He be received?"

"I don't know."

"He would be considered a crackpot, New Age type with a fringe following." Elohim's voice had lost some of its gentle, soothing quality and was becoming deeper and louder. "When He came before, it was a simpler, less cynical time, and it still took hundreds of years before his teachings spread far enough to do good. This world does not have hundreds of years."

"What about you?"

"Me? What should I do? Appoint you as the twenty-first-century Moses and send you out of this room with more commandments for the people? Or perhaps you would have me, with a wave of my hand, change the hearts and minds of the billions who live on this planet?"

Slightly concerned that he was angering Elohim, Reese pressed ahead. "Why not?"

"*Why not?* If, when you are finished raising your children, they move away, only to become something much less than you hoped for, would you

kidnap them, bring them back home, and brainwash them to comply with your way of thinking?"

"If I saw them heading toward a certain disaster, I *would* do that, or something like it!"

Elohim paused. Reese could see that he was calming himself, while thinking over what Reese had said. Up to this point in their conversations, Reese had never seen Elohim appear to be at a loss for words. He found it disconcerting.

Elohim finally replied, "Perhaps my analogy was not a good one. Reese, do you recall the schoolyard child who thought himself so clever by asking the nun, 'Can God throw a boulder so hard that He cannot stop it?'"

Reese nodded.

"The answer is…yes, he can. When I created mankind, I created a vibrant, thinking, questioning, free-minded being. Remember, I created mankind so that I could eventually fill Heaven with members of this wondrous race. What I did not create was a race who could be controlled by me. How could someone whose mind you controlled be a suitable companion? Would it truly be a Heaven if it were filled by mindless zombies with no free will? You, of all people, should know that. And so, this magnificent being, capable of such beauty and art and love and joy and wisdom, is also capable of such ugliness and trash and hatred and misery and ignorance. It is not knowing…not knowing the outcome as each pair of genes combines…that makes the process so special. The joy and wisdom would have no value if there was not the possibility of misery and pain.

"Reese, I cannot wave my hand and change the hearts and minds of the people. I cannot do so because that is the way they were made. Once turned loose, each person will become…someone – either good or bad, but a someone of his or her own choosing. Would the commandments be needed if this were not so? Would faith? You have always been taught that you have free will. If this were not the case, how could you be held accountable for your actions, for the person that you become?

"Although I am the Creator, I have very few options open to me. I may leave mankind alone, knowing that a certain downfall is imminent. I may bring down destruction to clean the slate, as I have in the past. I may select

a few who have proved themselves to be deserving and bring them to Heaven, leaving the rest to follow the path they have freely chosen. Any other course would spoil the creation itself."

Reese felt that Elohim, if offered another alternative, would accept it, willingly and joyfully. For there was no happiness within Elohim for this outcome, nor did Reese detect even the slightest degree of malice. Elohim did appear to be a loving and benign Creator, faced with a repugnant task and wishing that it were not so. But Reese could not conceive of a solution to offer, an alternative for Elohim to consider. Elohim was correct. To change the course of mankind, one would need to tinker with the makeup of man.

"Forgive my arrogance, Elohim. I am trying, in my mind, to find another path for you to follow. You have had an eternity to contemplate this…and I, a mere lifetime."

"My eternity and your lifetime are not so different. It is only time…and time is an illusion."

"An illusion?"

Before Elohim could respond, the door to the room opened, and a man whom Reese had never met, yet recognized instantly, strode in. "Doctor Johnson, I'm Bill Burke."

"I know, sir."

"If you wouldn't mind, I would appreciate a few minutes with Elohim."

"Not at all." Turning, Reese said, "Perhaps we could resume exactly where we left off when I return?"

"If you wish."

After Reese had left the room, Burke took his seat and said, "I just came from seeing the Archbishop."

"I see."

"My previous visit with him, he had been hearty, healthy, and full of vigor. He now looks like a broken man. Would you mind telling me what happened?"

"In fact, sir, I would. Even Kerry Coughlin deserves his privacy."

"Yes…I understand that you disabled the microphones during your meeting with him. Why do you say 'even Kerry Coughlin' with such

contempt?"

"As I said, the details of that discussion are best confined to Mr. Coughlin and me."

"You mean Archbishop Coughlin."

"No, I do not."

Sighing in frustration, Bill Burke started to get up to leave, when Elohim said, "I am willing to discuss one of Coughlin's failings, as it related to you."

"His failing…having to do with me. I don't understand. The Archbishop has always been a fine person and a good friend. He has always been available when I needed help."

"Mr. Burke, it is not the role of Catholic clergy to be 'a good friend.' It is their role to help you at a time of need. As you may recall, my method of introduction with you was to mention the name of your mistress."

Burke turned bright red, glancing toward the window.

"Not to worry. I have once again, as you put it, disabled the microphones." As Burke visibly relaxed, Elohim continued, "What I did not mention to you in our first meeting was the incident involving Kerry Coughlin. You, Mr. Burke, made Jennifer Wachter pregnant. When she came to you with this news, you sought out Kerry Coughlin, asking for his guidance and advice. You are a married man, married in the Church to a fine and faithful woman who has supported you and raised your children and adored you. You repaid this by taking a mistress and compounded it by making her pregnant."

Bill Burke's eyes bulged, the veins on his temples throbbed, and his face lost all color. He began to speak but Elohim cut him off with a wave of his hand, continuing to speak, "As I said, you came to Coughlin and told him all, asking what you should do. Instead of advising you to provide a healthy environment for your mistress to carry the baby to term, instead of advising you to tell your wife the truth that she deserved, instead of telling you that it would be your responsibility to raise this new child with or without the help of your wife, Kerry Coughlin advised you to arrange an abortion and pay off Jennifer Wachter."

"It…it was the right thing…."

"You left from seeing Kerry Coughlin believing that it was the right thing to do, because an *archbishop* of the Church advised it, sanctioned it, and de facto blessed it. He failed in his duties…he failed you."

William Burke's face told the story of his thoughts and emotions as he reviewed the incident, as well as his life with his family, changing from defensiveness and irritation, gradually to self-doubt, and eventually to sadness and then despair.

After several minutes of silence, Burke's voice, barely audible, asked, "Father…will I go to hell?"

Staring at the FBI Director with pity in his eyes, Elohim said, "My son, did you commit a sin?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Did you know that you were committing a sin as you did it?"

"Yes." Burke's voice quavered as he replied.

"You do not blame Kerry Coughlin for leading you astray?"

"No, Sir. I do not. I knew, as he told me what I should do, that it was wrong. I'm not a fool…well, I guess I am."

"We are not yet at the day of judgment. I cannot promise you that it is possible for you to redeem yourself in my eyes within the time remaining, because it is only days. However, I can promise you that if you do not even try, your fate is sealed."

Bill Burke found some slight solace in these words. Beginning to rise, he reached out to touch Elohim's hands. With only a look, Elohim stopped him short of this. "Go, my son. You have much to do and little time."

Burke stood unsteadily and walked to the door.

"Just one more thing, Mr. Burke."

He stopped and turned to face Elohim. "Yes, Sir?"

"You have much to be sorry for…some you do not yet know. Jennifer Wachter took your money. She did not keep her appointment for the abortion but chose to give the child life."

Bill Burke did not think that he could handle another shock. Gripping the doorknob fiercely, he said, "She had the baby?"

“Yes, she did. She had a son.” Elohim drew a deep breath, releasing it slowly before saying, “She also died in childbirth.”

“Died! Ooohhh.” Burke collapsed against the door, overwhelmed by guilt and grief. “Oh, my God,” he murmured. Taking minutes to recover, he faintly asked, “My son. Where’s my son?”

“He was adopted and is being raised by two wonderful people who love him as if he is their own.”

“Can I see him?”

“Is your selfishness so great that you would disrupt your son’s life and the life of his parents, simply so you could satisfy your ego by seeing him?”

Burke just stared at Elohim, saying nothing.

At last, Elohim continued, “Remember, William Burke, you have mere days left. You may use them to set right as much as you can, or use them to bring more pain down upon you and the ones you love. Please, depart. You have much to do.”

Bill Burke left.

Chapter Ten

Reese and Claire Johnson were eating sandwiches in the cafeteria, when Craig McWilliams hurried into the room. “Reese, you need to see this. Come quickly.”

“What is it?”

“The Archbishop is making a public statement.”

“Oh, no!” Reese jumped up, leaving his food, and followed with Claire right behind. As they entered the observation room adjacent to Elohim’s area, Reese saw that the wall-mounted television was already on.

Kerry Coughlin was sitting at the desk in his diocese office, looking two decades older than he had just hours ago. His voice was shaky and feeble, his eyes sunken. “Judgment Day,” he said, “has been foretold for many millennia. Although described in the Bible as a day accompanied by great turmoil and calamity, which is not occurring, I tell you that this day has come.” Coughlin paused for well over a minute, staring directly into the television camera lens. He continued, ”God is among us. I have seen Him. He is the Father of Abraham, the Father of Moses, the Father of Jesus, and He has come down to judge us all.”

Coughlin stopped again, this time having great difficulty controlling his voice. Looking down at the desk for a moment, he picked up and sipped from a glass of water before continuing. “It is time for all the faithful to rejoice. It is also time for all who have sinned to prepare themselves for their penance.” After another long pause, he finally resumed, “I must confess to you, to all who have given me the respect of my position, to my friends who trusted me and sought my counsel, to my blessed colleagues and to his Holiness, our Pope, that I have sinned – I have failed my mission assigned by God, and I have failed all of you. I pray that God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, in a thousand or ten thousand years, can forgive me and have mercy on my soul. I also pray that each of you whom I failed, by not showing you the light when you were in darkness, can find it in your heart also to forgive me. May God’s blessings be with each of you.”

Coughlin, clearly finished, turned to look off-camera. Father James hurried to assist him as he rose from his desk and left the office. The view

on the screen returned to the midday network anchor, a veteran of nearly twenty-five years of news reporting, who appeared to be at a loss for words. Relieved at the arrival of some information, the anchorman pressed his earbud deeper and listened for a moment, saying, "Our correspondent at the Archbishop's office was told just moments ago that the person Archbishop Coughlin was referring to is being held at the Hoover Building, FBI headquarters." Still pushing the earbud, he continued, "Apparently, William Burke, the Director of the FBI and a personal friend of the Archbishop, asked him to meet with the sus…person. We are trying to reach Director Burke at this time." He paused again, then continued, "We're being told that William Burke is currently unavailable, and Assistant Director Margo Jackson is in charge. We are attempting to reach Ms. Jackson now. We are also attempting to contact Cardinal Bonavente, Coughlin's immediate superior in the Church. Right now, though, we will take a brief time-out. When we return, hopefully we can get more information on this apparent breakdown by an archbishop of the Catholic Church."

McWilliams muted the commercials, turning to the others in the room. "Well, I guess the cat's out of the bag."

"More as if Pandora's box has been opened," said Claire.

Reese asked McWilliams, "What was the plan for going public?"

"I don't think anyone got that far. They were all waiting for some absolute proof, and until we got that, they just assumed that it was going to end up being a hoax."

"Now what?"

"I don't know. I wonder why Preston Bennett isn't here."

Electronic beeping came from the wall phone. McWilliams answered it quickly. After a "Yes, sir" and an "Okay," he handed the phone to Reese. "Speak of the devil…crap, I need to stop saying those things…it's Clayton Dean and he wants to talk to you." Reese took the phone.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary. This is Reese Johnson."

"Dr. Johnson, you've obviously heard the news."

"Yes, I have."

"Are you prepared to go public with a position?"

It was, of course, the obvious question and the reason for Reese's presence; yet, he had not focused on that particular issue. "I suppose I am."

Trying hard not to sound testy, Dean responded, "'I suppose' is not the answer I was hoping to hear. You are the expert to whom this administration is looking for an answer; the answer needs to be definitive and strong – whatever that answer is."

"I understand, Mr. Secretary. But I've had less than two days."

"The Archbishop of the Catholic Church seems to have figured it out after meeting with our guest for less than an hour."

"Yes, that's true. It's…."

Dean interrupted, "Is there something that concerns you about our guest?"

"It isn't actually that. I'm just not sure in my gut that I'm ready to take the position of my career…hell, my life…on something that is so monumental, without a little more time."

"How much time?"

"Till tomorrow morning?"

"We can stall that long. I am going to announce that we have brought you in to do this. I'll also set up a press conference for 2:00 p.m. Let's do it here at State. I don't want this to appear as if we think Elohim is a criminal. We need to move this away from the FBI as soon as we can."

"That makes sense. All right, I will commit to having my determination completed by two o'clock."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow morning at my office. Good day and good luck."

"Thank you."

Reese hung up the phone and glanced through the window at Elohim, who sat impassively at the table, his hands folded. McWilliams turned the sound from the television back on just as the commercial break ended.

"Good morning, and welcome back. To recap our breaking story, Catholic Archbishop Kerry Coughlin made a statement just minutes ago from his office in Washington, D.C., creating a firestorm of controversy. In case you are just joining us, here is an excerpt of his statement."

As the image reverted to Coughlin, Reese turned to Claire and said, “Secretary Dean wants me to take a position on this right away.”

“You’re not ready.”

“I told him that. I committed to two o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“Is that enough time?”

Pointing at the television as the Coughlin segment finished, Reese said, “It’ll have to be.”

The news commentator continued, “We’ll take you now to Sheila Smith, who is with Randolf Duncan, the Nobel Prize-winning biologist and outspoken critic of the Church, for his comments on Archbishop Coughlin’s statement. Sheila?”

The scene changed to the Berkeley campus where Duncan stood, wearing a flannel shirt and a tan fedora. Reynolds commented, “Is he trying to look like Indiana Jones?” No one laughed.

The reporter asked, “Professor Duncan, you’ve just seen the tape of Archbishop Coughlin’s statement. Your comments?”

“Well Sheila, you’re probably asking the wrong person. My field of study is biology. From what I saw, you need to get an opinion from a psychiatrist…someone who specializes in delusional behavior.” He paused, smiled smugly, and continued, “I guess this public breakdown of a person who is so steeped in the superstitions and mumbo-jumbo of religion was inevitable. What concerns me is how far this administration has gone over the edge. If they are conducting meetings with ‘god,’ we have a bigger problem. This President has also walked a fine line between living in the real world and conducting the affairs of his office as if we all lived in a theocracy. He may finally be going too far.”

“Professor Duncan, what about the possibility, remote as it may be, that God has come down to Earth?”

Laughing, Duncan responded, “We live in an infinite universe with infinite possibilities; therefore, it is possible. It’s equally possible that he has come down here to have a conference with the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus. Look, it’s time that the world, especially the United States, stops clinging to these ancient delusions. They have done nothing but damage to the human race.”

The reporter turned to face the camera and said, “Bill, back to you.”

“Thank you, Sheila. We have in our studio a former Catholic priest….”

McWilliams switched off the set. “It is going to get ugly.”

“It has been ugly for years; this is just bringing it to the surface,” replied Reese.

Reynolds asked Reese, “What exactly is the deal? Why do these folks feel a need to attack instead of just letting people believe what they want?”

“It’s a human tendency. When the various religions controlled the politics of their regions, they utilized government to stamp out competing religions. Religion was also notable in its intolerance of science, declaring it heresy and executing its practitioners. The communists were famous for not allowing any alternative ideologies to exist. The whites in America did it to the blacks, basically trying to make them as invisible as possible for more than a hundred years. After the civil rights movement, when many blacks began to move into positions of power within various industries – rather than pursuing the goal of equality they once had preached – they removed all of the whites from their new spheres of influence. Plato said, ‘Birds of a feather flock together,’ and that is at the foundation of it. Those within the secularist/scientist movement have now gained the upper hand in much of the world. It is now their turn. Although they claim to be the enlightened movement, as has every other philosophy or religion in the past, their enlightenment does not exempt them or prevent them from engaging in the same ugliness that the previously dominant groups employed. Their goal is the same: the eradication of all who disagree.”

“Sadly, this is all true.”

Startled, they all turned to see that Elohim had opened the door from the interrogation room and had silently joined them.

“It is tribalism in its purest form,” he continued. “Every man and woman wants to be a part of a group that is smaller than the entirety of mankind. It is hard-wired into all of you. Whether it is your stratum of intelligence, your gender, your physical fitness, your skin color, your nationalism, or your religion, you strive to identify a ‘distinctness’ of which you are a part. Inevitably, the distinctness you seek is perceived by you as superior to those who will not or cannot become a part of the group. The

feeling of superiority leads to intolerance. Once your group is identified and solidified, the members quickly reach a point where they cannot tolerate the presence or even the sight of a nonmember."

Reese asked, "Is this trait found in those who become the Chosen? It doesn't sound like the kind of person you would want in Heaven."

Elohim smiled. "As I said, the tendency is hard-wired. The Chosen are as susceptible to it as all others. The difference is in its manifestation. Those who will join me in Heaven have identified their tribe as being set apart from the rest by its goodness and by the understanding that the individual is less important than the family, less important than the group, and even less important than certain ideals. Also, the Chosen do not seek to exclude; they seek to include all who wish to live this life. Although they seek to include all others, they are successful in resisting the human urge, which Reese described, to eradicate all others."

Craig asked, "Elohim, what about…?"

Elohim interrupted, holding up his hand, "I wish to put to rest, once and for all time, the deplorable historical events done in my name and the name of my Son. Any person can claim to be a Christian; there is no entrance requirement. Some of the most magnificent human beings ever to walk the face of the Earth were Christians, and some of them were not. The same is true of the most evil who have ever lived. Many horrendous acts were performed by these evil men under my name. As has always been promised to each of you, those men received their judgment.

"I ask you, Mr. McWilliams, did the acts of David Hale forty years ago prove that your organization was not what it pretended to be?"

Reese looked at Craig quizzically. McWilliams explained, "Back in the '60s, an FBI agent planted a bomb at the house of mafia boss Joe Bonnano. He wasn't trying to kill Bonnano; he was attempting to start a gang war. None of it was authorized. He was fired and prosecuted." Responding to Elohim, he continued, "And I see Your point. His actions didn't make the FBI an evil organization."

"And remember, you have a stringent set of entrance guidelines and checks. Mr. Hale's actions have not been the only embarrassments to the agency, have they?"

"No."

"Mr. McWilliams and Mr. Reynolds, I am certain that you are as weary of being reminded of Waco as the Church is weary of the reminders of the Crusades and the Inquisition."

They both nodded emphatically. Elohim continued.

"Imagine, then, that FBI badges were available at every convenience store for the price of a single dollar, and once the badges were purchased, the bearers became legitimate agents of your organization. Could you be found to be responsible for their acts?"

"Of course not," answered McWilliams.

Reese interjected, "But the agency *would* be responsible if the Director did not move to stop the acts or punish the offenders."

"Reese, I have already told you that past offenders received their inevitable judgment. If you are comparing the Director to the Pope, the Pope's participation or lack of action while presiding over the Church was certainly a part of the judgment he received, as well. I have never believed that it is my role to intervene in individual actions. Mankind was put on Earth to be judged eventually for individual suitability to be in Heaven. If there existed no temptations, no challenges, no evil to overcome, then what is there to judge? That is why the essence of a small child who dies is returned to Earth in another form…is given another chance to prove itself. Contrary to what has become a popular belief, I do not welcome the innocent to Heaven solely because of their innocence. If a person, from birth, is hidden away from society and never engages…never is forced to make choices…how might that person be judged?

"When individual members of the church or the government, or of the leadership itself, become corrupt, as has happened many times in your history, there inevitably will arise an individual or group who will oppose them and end their evil. That is as it should be. The evil and the just shall both receive their judgment. The affairs on Earth are what permit this judgment."

"Sink or swim," said Reynolds with the slightest hint of disapproval in his voice.

“In one sense, yes. I did create this environment as a test. However, where your comparison breaks down is obvious. Who among you was thrown into this sea and expected to swim without the benefit of help and teaching from others? Be it loving parents or extended family members, mentors, clergy, or friends, there have always been people available to you to metaphorically hold your head above the water as you learned the skills.”

Still curious, Reynolds asked, “Then what’s the point of praying if you never intervene, if you never help?”

“Nicholas, when you were in New Orleans and prayed to me, did you receive help?”

Reese watched Reynolds as this question was asked, knowing that he had not yet had any experience with Elohim. Reynolds blinked several times, swallowing hard, trying to conceal his surprise and disbelief. Reese asked, “Nicholas, what happened in New Orleans?”

Making sure that his voice was steady, Reynolds answered, “Typical case of bad ‘intel.’ We were sent to pick up a guy who was making bombs in a warehouse loft. Our people thought he was a loner, trying to break into Al-Queda, trying to get noticed. Strictly small-timer, supposedly. I went out with only two other agents. I announced and entered, and all hell broke loose. There were twelve seasoned terrorists inside with UZIs and AK-47s. Because I went in first, I had the benefit of a moment of surprise and was able to dive down a small stairwell inside the loft. My two agents each took more than fifty rounds before they hit the floor.” Reynolds paused. In his eyes, it was obvious he was reliving something that he had replayed a thousand times. Finally, he continued, “I was in a 10 x 15 storage room at the bottom of the stairs, with a broken leg, a smashed radio, ten rounds in the magazine, and two spare clips. The room had no way out except up the stairs. Every time one of the bad guys tried to come down after me, I was able to brush him back with a couple of shots, never connecting any rounds. It was a matter of time till I ran out.

“I’d never prayed before. I mean, I said my Hail Marys and Our Fathers in church, but I never *prayed* before…never asked for anything. I sure as hell prayed then. I prayed and prayed, asking for help. I knew that they would either keep playing cat and mouse with me until I ran out of rounds,

or think of some other way to get to me. It was the worst situation I've ever been in, and I couldn't figure a way out.

"It was about the fifth time they had one of their guys pop over the edge of the stairwell that I fired two quick shots to brush him back, emptying my magazine. He had crawled to the edge of the well, extending his AK-47 out as his head cleared. He had already twisted the gun around to point down into the hole so he could shoot off a spray, hoping to hit me. My second slug ricocheted off the barrel. The lab guys said it was a one-in-a-million fluke. My slug bounced off his AK-47 and slammed into a wad of plastique that they were using to make a bomb. The plastique went off, right at table height in the middle of the room. They were all killed or knocked unconscious. I was able to crawl up the stairs, cuff the survivors, and call for help. The bomb squad told me later that my slug hitting the wad of plastique was weird enough, but the fact that the other fifty pounds of stored explosives in the room were shielded from the blast by four of the terrorists had saved my life. If they hadn't been between the blast and the other explosives, the building would have gone up, including me."

Looking at Elohim, his voice so soft that it was nearly inaudible, Reynolds asked, "That was you?"

Elohim simply nodded.

"Thank you."

McWilliams spoke up, "That sounds like intervening to me."

Turning, Elohim said, "Do you not see a difference between controlling the direction of mankind and helping a worthy soul? As I have said before, if I controlled that which occurred, there could be no accountability. On the other hand, when a good, deserving person is in need, he or she may receive that assistance. Nicholas Reynolds, on the day that my angels interceded on his behalf, had already become who he was. He was fit for judgment on that day, and saving him did nothing to affect that judgment. What saving Nicholas did accomplish was allowing him to have positive influence on others in the days, months, and years since."

Claire asked, "It is only the good who are helped?"

"Either the good or those with the potential to become good…and not every request. There have been many occasions when I have been

beseeched by a worthy soul and have not interceded."

"Why is that?"

"Does involving a higher power always help you as a person? If unfortunate events that are out of your control bring you to the brink of financial ruin, which is more wise – assistance from above or handling the problems yourself, even if handling them means plummeting to the depths of poverty and despair for a time? It is during your plunge and the ensuing recovery that you will find a depth and strength to your character that you did not know even existed. By intervening, I would deprive you of that discovery. Not assisting Nicholas would have only ended his life."

Persistently, Claire continued, "Did You not also deprive those twelve men of their chance to become something better?"

"I can assure you that the wish to become a better person was not in their hearts or in their minds. I only hastened their demise a bit. The plan foiled by Nicholas was for all of them to be suicide bombers mingled within the crowds during Mardi Gras the following week."

Reynolds joined the conversation. "Yes. Their plans, along with maps marking out each of the locations for detonation, were found in the rubble by forensics."

Elohim explained, "I know you could argue that the lives of the people saved at the Mardi Gras celebration will touch countless others, and that this simple act to save Nicholas will have a ripple effect upon thousands of others."

Claire, clearly thinking along those lines, nodded.

"The truth is, *that* is not my concern. I have observed the past; I exist in the present; and the future remains a mystery to us all. Like you, I use my knowledge of the past to help me decide the best course today. There are times when my actions have certainly altered the future. The lesson many people never learn is – so do theirs. It is not only their deliberate decisions. Claire, your choice to stop your car at a yellow light, instead of driving through the intersection, delays another driver who misses a chance meeting with a woman who would have become his wife. They would have a child who would become the next great leader, or the next great villain. Can you live with that responsibility?"

“Of course. I have no way of knowing any of that when I decide to stop.”

“Neither do I.”

Craig interrupted, “I think we’d better tune back in to this,” turning the sound up on the television. The Assistant Director of the FBI, Margo Jackson, was answering reporters.

“We are currently in discussions with a person who has made some rather startling claims. He is not being held against his will. Yes,” she said, pointing to another reporter.

“Is he claiming to be God?”

“Actually, from what I understand, he has refrained from using that name. He has described himself as the Creator, and the name that he has given is Elohim.” Seeing pencils raised, she said, “I believe that’s spelled E-L-O-H-I-M.”

“Why is he at the FBI?”

“He arrived at the Hoover Building at his own choosing and asked to speak with Bill Burke. He has simply remained there for reasons of convenience.”

Another reporter asked, “Did he speak with Director Burke?”

“As a matter of fact, he did.”

“What was discussed?”

“I do not know the details of the conversation. Apparently, Elohim was persuasive enough to convince the Director to proceed with additional interviews by various experts.”

“Who are the experts?”

“We asked several linguists to speak with Elohim. He was also interviewed by the head of our profiling division, Craig McWilliams. He is currently being interviewed by Professor Reese Johnson, an academic expert in religion, anthropology, and psychology.”

Nearly all of the reporters shouted for recognition. Jackson selected another. “Are you saying that Reese Johnson, the controversial author of the pro-religion books and professor who was dismissed by Harvard, was brought in?”

“First of all, Professor Johnson was not dismissed by Harvard; he resigned. And, yes, it is the same Dr. Johnson.”

“What is the consensus of the people who have met with Elohim so far? Do they think he’s God?”

“We are not taking any position on his claims, at least until such time as we have finished our process.”

Another reporter asked, “Is all of this being done because of the President?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“What I’m saying is…under the previous administration, if someone walked into the FBI offices and claimed to be God, would that person have been given the same treatment, or escorted out of the building as a crackpot?”

“At this time, the President’s involvement has been zero. We have pursued the avenues I’ve described at the direction of William Burke, as a result of his interview with Elohim. I’d like to mention that Mr. Burke was an appointee of the previous administration and not of this one.”

“Is Director Burke available for comments?”

“He is not. He has taken a brief leave to handle some personal business.”

“Is his sudden leave related to this Elohim?”

“Not to my knowledge. Those are all the questions I’ll take at this time. We will hold another press conference as soon as additional information is available.”

The reporters all began shouting at once, wanting more answers, but Margo Jackson turned, left the podium, and walked briskly out of the briefing room. McWilliams muted the sound again.

Addressing the group, Reese asked, “Well, what happens now?”

Claire, McWilliams, and Reynolds all remained silent. Only Elohim responded, “Based upon past experience, I’d say that people will react in a manner consistent with who they are.”

Reynolds snorted, “In other words, all hell’s gonna break loose.”

Elohim smiled and said, “Exactly.”

Chapter Eleven

Lynn Sheffield sat staring at the news channel in disbelief as Margo Jackson spoke Reese Johnson's name. 'So that's what's so big,' he thought. Lynn decided that the President, finally going over the edge, had cooked up this scheme and brought in Johnson to swear by it.

Springing up from the edge of the motel room bed, Sheffield paced. He needed to figure out where Shelby and her group would appear. He realized that it would be the Hoover Building. 'The place must be crawling with press by now. It's perfect.'

Tossing on a T-shirt and blue jeans, he nearly ran out the door.

א

Cardinal Mario Bonavente listened patiently to the soft murmur of static as he waited on hold for William Kent, the attaché bishop and assistant to the Pope, to come on the line.

"Mario?"

"William. Blessings to you."

"And you, my friend. What is Kerry's status?"

"He is resting. After his…shall we say, surprise statement, he nearly collapsed."

"Did you have a chance to speak with him?"

"Only a little. He is convinced that this Elohim is the Coming. When I ask him why he is so sure, he babbles almost incoherently, saying only 'He knows…He knows' repeatedly."

"Have his aides shed any light on this?"

"Some. Apparently Kerry was asked by his friend Bill Burke to visit with Elohim. Upon his arrival he met, among others, Dr. Reese Johnson."

"I know of Johnson's work. In some ways he is a friend of the Church; in others he is not."

"Yes, that's true. He is the one chosen to authenticate this Elohim."

"A lay person? Wouldn't that be our work?"

"Although you and I may think so, America is not Italy."

"Italy is no longer Italy, my friend."

"The world *is* changing. To continue, he met briefly with Dr. Johnson and then met with Elohim. Elohim asked Kerry's aides to leave them alone, and they did, waiting in the observation room."

"So they saw it all."

"They saw it all, but they heard nothing. The moment they left the interview room, the monitoring speakers malfunctioned."

"Did they hear anything at all?"

"The malfunction continued until they saw Kerry drop forward onto the table. At that point, Elohim looked directly at them through the one-way mirror and spoke to them over the speaker, which had begun to work, asking them to help their friend."

The Cardinal waited through the long pause, as the attaché bishop absorbed the details. After several moments Kent prodded, "That was all they had to offer?"

It was Mario's turn to pause. He had made a real effort to remain as neutral and clinical in his description as possible. It would be much more difficult to do that while giving this last bit of news. "Both Father McGonigle and Father James shook the hand of Elohim."

Sensing something important, Bishop Kent asked warily, "And?"

"They both described to me a feeling of euphoria and pure joy, such as they have never felt, that lasted until the touch was broken."

Again, silence filled the line. At last Kent said, "I am aware of no guidance for this. It has always been taught that when He arrives, there will be no doubt. Tell me, Mario, did Elohim touch Coughlin?"

"He did, but not until the very end of their talk. It was his touch that appeared to plunge Kerry into the abyss." The Cardinal paused before asking, "Do we have a word from His Holiness?"

"He has been briefed but, as yet, has made no comment. I will pass on this latest information and get back to you."

"Is there anything else that you would like me to do at this time? The press is becoming insistent for an official statement."

“They may wait a thousand years as far as the Pontiff is concerned. I suppose it would be appropriate for you to meet this Elohim. Do you have any feelings about that prospect?”

“You mean other than unbelievable excitement and profound fear? No, I have none.”

The bishop in Rome laughed. “I understand. Contact his hosts and inquire as to whether they would welcome a visit from you.”

“I will do so.”

“Thank you, Mario. I will call after I have spoken with His Holiness.”

“Good-bye.”

א

Reese and Claire stepped out into the heat and humidity of a Washington, D.C. midday in August. Reynolds and McWilliams had asked them to lunch, but Reese refused, wanting to spend some time with his wife. The front steps of the Hoover Building were already inundated with the personnel, cables, and equipment of the press, so Reese and Claire followed the route suggested by Craig, using a tunnel that connected to an innocuous looking office building two blocks away.

Reese studied the faces of his fellow pedestrians, looking for a sign of something different and finding none. He and Claire were but two of thousands flocking into the streets at lunchtime. The announcement from the Archbishop that God had arrived to judge mankind apparently caused no discernible difference on the street.

As if reading his mind, Claire said, “Doesn’t it seem that everything should be different?”

“I was just thinking the same thing. I guess that right now, all they have are the ravings of a nut; at least, that’s the way the folks in the press are portraying it. It’s business as usual until people get something definitive.”

“That would be you, I suppose.”

Reese laughed. “Hey, no pressure, huh? No, people have different triggers. For some, it will be when their government announces it. For others, that announcement will be proof that it can’t be the truth. For some, it will be an endorsement from their church. Others will wait until the

media declare that it's real. The rest will simply react to the mob, whichever direction the masses may go."

"Do you think the Catholics are going to buy into this?"

"The rank and file?"

"No, I mean the Vatican."

"I don't know. There hasn't been a single visitor who has walked out of that room a nonbeliever. I guess the Pope will just have to meet him." Chuckling, Reese added, "I hope I'm there for that."

"What about the Jews?"

"They're not nearly as monolithic as the Catholics. None of the movements – the Orthodox, the Conservative, and the Reformed – have a single head. The rabbis control and organize their religion by committee. There are a few rabbis who are pretty influential, like Rabbi Schmidt in New York. I imagine if he were to endorse Elohim, it would sway many within the faith."

"The Protestants?"

"Which ones? That's the problem. There are several major Protestant Christian faiths, hundreds of significant ones, and literally thousands of small splinter groups. Ideologically, they are all over the place. I guess they'll have to figure it out for themselves or take their cues from the others."

"The Muslims?"

"That's a big question mark in my mind. For one thing, the Quran foretells of great battles where most of the Jews and Christians are killed, and the survivors convert to Islam prior to the possibility of a day of judgment. There are many other things that are to happen beforehand. These are called the Signs of Qiyamah. Other than the epidemic consumption of alcohol, ignorance prevailing over knowledge, and widespread immorality, the rest of the signs have not happened yet. My guess is that they will not accept Elohim as their God, but I don't know for sure."

"What about you, hotshot? Have you made up your mind yet?"

"I've made up my mind that he isn't a mere mortal. That has been a fairly easy conclusion to reach. Well, let me ask you…after making the

mental adjustment from believing you're dealing with a man to believing you're dealing with a supernatural being, what test can be contrived by a mortal that would separate God from Satan?"

Claire was silent, looking thoughtful. Reese quickly added, "I'm not saying he is Satan."

"Especially since you know He's listening."

"No," Reese said, laughing. "I've discussed this with him. What I'm saying is…I don't believe that he is Satan, and I don't have any reason to suspect it. It's just that…."

"Reese, it's just that the whole world is waiting for your answer."

"That's an overstatement! But I do feel it is crucial that I get it right. Crud! I don't know, honey, what do you think?"

They reached the front door of the restaurant that Craig had recommended, both hesitating before they went in. Claire answered, "I'm sold. I think He's the real thing. I'm just wondering when you're going to get around to asking Him the big question."

"Which is?"

"Which is…are we…you and I…Matthew and Melissa…four of the Chosen?"

ℵ

Sheffield had circled the monumental Hoover Building twice in search of a sign of Shelby and her group. The press was there in abundance. Several small groups were beginning to form up on the sidewalks, but nothing looked organized to Lynn. The hot, humid air had long ago caused him to soak his T-shirt with sweat. His hair was plastered to his scalp and his beard itched. 'God, this is miserable weather!' he thought as he lowered himself to sit on the steps in the shade of a column. It did not help. 'Back in Tucson, you can find relief in the shade. Here it's just as bad as out in the direct sunlight. It has to be the humidity.'

Sapped of all his previous enthusiasm, Lynn just leaned back against the stone column, disgusted.

"What are you doing here, mister?"

Sheffield, thinking he was being hassled by some beat cop for loitering, answered, “Just resting for a min….” Looking up, he saw Special Agent Reynolds, accompanied by someone other than the black agent he had seen in Tucson.

“I mean,” Reynolds asked, “what are you doing *here*, in D.C.?”

Lynn stood to face the agents, intent on showing them both that he was unintimidated. “Still a free country, right? Or do I need your permission to travel, *Herr Kapitan*?”

The other agent spoke up, at least Lynn assumed he was another FBI goon. “What’s the deal, Reynolds?”

“When I was in Tucson picking up the professor, this guy was there, trying to accost him in the parking lot. Now he’s here. Coincidence?”

“Accost! Wait a minute. I wanted to talk to him. Still do!”

“It’s Sheffield, right?” Reynolds asked.

“Yeah.”

“Look, Mr. Sheffield, here’s the situation. I could pull you into that building and hold you several hours for questioning. It’s not a lot of fun, but you’d survive it just fine. While we had you, we could check into every activity you’ve ever been involved in, look for outstanding warrants in all fifty states, take your DNA and add it to our database while checking to see if a drop of your blood ever turned up on a crime scene, talk to your associates, do all of the stuff that we here at the Bureau do so well. Again, not a lot of fun but you would do just fine.

“My other option is to let you walk away from here right now. This is the second time that I’ve told you to walk away and not look back. Not only do I want you not to look back, I want you not to come back. If you do, I promise you we’ll have that little party I just described.” Reynolds pointed up at two surveillance cameras mounted on different columns. “Those cameras are all over the place on every government building in town. Your mug has just been added to our face-recognition database. When I go inside, I’m going to put a nice red flag next to that face. The next time you walk within a hundred yards of the Lincoln Memorial, alarms here at headquarters will go off. I don’t know what you were planning, but I can tell you right now that those plans are ruined. You might as well spend the

rest of your stay in our city wearing a clown suit and big, red nose. Am I clear?"

Sheffield, through Reynolds' entire lecture, felt his anger growing. He struggled to tamp it down, to keep a lid on it somehow. When Reynolds finished, it was all Sheffield could do not to spout off. Not trusting himself to speak, he just nodded.

"Good. Now clear out of here."

Sheffield turned to leave. As he did, he saw Shelby, as well as two of the others he met in Tucson, standing a few yards away. They had recognized him, had seen him being scolded by the FBI agent, and were hanging back, not wanting to get dragged into his situation. Lynn realized they were more than close enough to have heard the part about his face being "red-flagged" in the system, making him *persona non grata* just about anywhere that he could have been helpful to the cause. As he walked down the steps toward the street, the erstwhile brothers- and sister-in-arms backed even further away, as if he were contagious. Lynn Sheffield felt that he was about to explode.

א

The phone rang at the Bennett residence. Preston Bennett's wife Debbie snatched it up at mid-ring, trying to stop the noise before it woke Preston. "Hello."

"Hi, Debbie, it's Clay. How's Preston doing?"

"Oh, hi, Clay. He's asleep now. His fever was about 101° the last time I checked."

Clayton Dean whistled. "Did you get him to a doctor?"

"Yeah, they say it's a virus, but they always say that. I insisted on some Cipro. This just came on so suddenly."

"I know. It's strange. He was fine yesterday."

"Clay, I saw the news. Is this Elohim thing what Preston has been involved in the last couple of days?"

"Yes, it is. I asked him to keep an eye on the situation for me."

"What's it about? This guy thinks he's God?"

“We don’t really know yet, Debbie. I mean, yes, he does. We just don’t where it’s going at this point.”

She knew that he was holding back information. “You’re just like Preston,” she chided. “He never tells me anything until I see it on the news.”

Laughing, he said, “All right, Debbie, I’d better go. You’ll call me if you need anything?”

“I will, Clay, thanks.”

ℵ

Mario Bonavente arrived at the Hoover Building through the “perp” route, a secluded driveway to an underground controlled-access garage with a private entrance. Both Margo Jackson and the Cardinal agreed it would be better if the press was not aware of his visit, at least not yet. He also drove a Silver Lexus, rather than the customary chauffeured limousine. Two agents waited as he parked, and escorted him to the hallway outside the interrogation room where Jackson waited.

“Your Excellency.”

“Ms. Jackson, please call me Mario. I suspect that we may be working together for a time. We should not be so distant.”

“Mario, it is. And please call me Margo.”

“Goodness, we sound like a bad vaudeville team.”

He shook her hand. Her grip was sturdy and solid, as was her gaze. This was clearly a woman who had worked her way up the hard way to reach her position. Chuckling, she responded, “He’s in here. Shall we go in?”

“Actually, I’m curious if Professor Johnson is present. I’d like to speak with him for a moment or two.”

“I’m afraid he and his wife have gone to lunch. They should be back shortly. If I had known…”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind waiting for him. Is there an office where we can talk until he returns? That is, if you have the time?”

“Yes. Please, this way.” She took him three doors down and peered in, to make certain it was not in use. Pushing the door open farther, she said, “This should do.”

They both went in and sat on the two straight-back chairs in front of the desk. Bonavente spoke first. “Do you mind my asking if you are a Catholic?”

“Not at all, and no, I was raised a Lutheran.”

“The Lutherans. A splendid church…a marvelous faith.”

“They’re idiots.”

Taken aback for a moment, the Cardinal could not help but burst out laughing. “Idiots?”

“Maybe it was just the particular church my family attended, but it felt more like a hippie commune than a church. I’ve always craved structure and rules…reward and punishment. One time I asked the minister for advice. I was a teenager, and my boyfriend wanted me to ‘go all the way.’ I asked the minister what I should do, hoping deep in my heart that he would tell me it was a sin and that I’d go to hell if I did it. Instead, he asked me to look within myself and find the answer. I told him that if I had the answer, I wouldn’t be there. So he said that love was a beautiful part of life and that we shouldn’t miss an opportunity to feel its joy.”

“He told you ‘If it feels good, do it’?”

“Basically! I never went back.”

“Have you ever considered our faith?”

“I did. I also thought about Orthodox Judaism. It seemed that both had a pretty firm set of standards.”

“Why didn’t you join us?”

“I joined the Marines instead.”

Again Mario rocked back with laughter. “I imagine that you found all of the structure you needed there.”

“I did. And when I left the Marine Corps, I went back to school, got my law degree, and came to work at the agency. I’ve been here ever since. I haven’t once felt a void that needed to be filled.”

“You are doing God’s work as much as I, perhaps more.”

“I like to think so.” She pulled her cell phone off her belt and punched in a speed-dial number. Someone answered immediately. “Craig, Margo, is

Johnson back? Good, bring him to 12C, please." Snapping the phone closed, she said to Mario, "He'll be right here."

"Thank you."

Less than a minute later there was a knock on the door. Margo jumped up to answer. McWilliams stood outside with Reese in tow. "Professor Johnson, we haven't met yet. I'm Margo Jackson."

Shaking her hand, Reese said, "A pleasure to meet you. I have gotten tired of saying this – if you could arrange for a sign I could wear around my neck or a memo to everyone – my name is Reese…please."

"Reese, it is. Please come in. I'd like you to meet Cardinal Bonavente. He'd like a few words with you, if you don't mind."

Stepping into the room, Reese extended his hand and started to speak, but the Cardinal was quicker. "I overheard your comment. Reese, it is indeed a pleasure to meet you. Please call me Mario."

Reese and Mario took the two chairs in front of the desk, and Margo Jackson started to leave.

"No, Margo," said Bonavente, "please stay. I would prefer your presence."

"All right," she said, taking the only available seat behind the desk.

The priest turned back to Johnson. "Please, sir, I have much to catch up on. Could you fill me in?" Reese glanced at the Assistant Director. She nodded.

Reese told his story in as much detail as he could recall, in chronological sequence, only leaving out a few of the personal details. The Cardinal sat impassively throughout the recitation, showing only the slightest emotion when Reese described the appearance of his lost manuscript. Finishing, Reese said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you something?"

"Please."

"How is Kerry Coughlin?"

Looking saddened, Mario answered, "He's completely withdrawn, 'detached' is probably the clinical description. We've had a psychiatrist in to see him. He doesn't even respond to physical stimuli."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

“Thank you.”

“I also wanted to ask what the Pope’s position is on this?”

“As far as I know, he does not yet have one. Perhaps my visit here will help him to decide.” The Cardinal leaned forward. Closely watching Reese’s face, he asked, “Tell me, is Elohim our God?”

Reese felt a certain surreal quality in the question, considering that it came from a cardinal of the Catholic Church. Not that the last two days had been normal. “Mario, my wife asked me the same question at lunch. I’ll give you the same answer. Elohim is not an ordinary man; he is not a mortal as we understand it. My dilemma is this: if I grant that he has supernatural powers, how can I tell if he is God, or something evil?”

“Lucifer?”

“I suppose.”

“Reese, you are wise to be concerned. This is precisely the type of trap that he would love to spring upon all of us. Are you familiar with the Rites of Exorcism?”

“I am. I’ve studied them at length. Are you proposing an exorcism?”

“I don’t know at this point. You asked the question and that is the only answer which comes to mind. I do not believe Lucifer could withstand the ritual without betraying himself.”

“Have you ever performed the Rites?”

“I have not. I have never even seen them performed. However, if it appears to be the appropriate course of action, and with His Holiness’ approval, the Vatican can certainly provide men who have.”

Margo Jackson broke in, “Guys, this is getting a little freaky. I’m not sure that we should be turning this into a circus sideshow.”

Reese responded before the Cardinal could speak. “Margo, the practice of exorcism is hardly a sideshow act. The Church is incredibly conservative in its application, and the documentation of its history is quite convincing.”

“Reese, that’s not what I mean. No matter what is logical, proper, or correct, I have to keep one eye on the politics. The press is already whipped into a frenzy over this, thanks to Coughlin. Performing an exorcism within FBI headquarters sounds like a bad tabloid headline or the subject of a crackpot conspiracy theory.”

Mario replied, “I understand. I’m not suggesting that an exorcism is even needed. And if, by chance, it is – I would not want it to be performed here.”

“Then where?” she asked.

“The Vatican.”

“The Vatican?” Reese blurted. “Mario, exorcisms have been performed in private bedrooms, caves, occasionally a local parish. Why would you need to do it in the Vatican?”

“In all of the documented cases with which I am familiar, the possessed have claimed to be many things…from demons to the devil himself. I have never read of a case where the possessed claimed to be God. I have also never read of a case where the possessed performed miracles such as those you have described. It is the opinion of the Church that the spirits exorcized in the past have been malignant spirits, possibly demons. I must still meet with him myself, but from what you have described, to achieve what Elohim has accomplished, either he is that which he says or he is possessed by Lucifer himself. If it is Lucifer, I am afraid we would need all of the holy power that resides within the Vatican to vanquish him.

“I remind you both, none of this even approaches a suggested course of action. Reese, you asked me how to be sure. The only answer of which I am aware is an exorcism. Now, may I meet him?”

As the three filed out of the room, Margo muttered under her breath, “What have I gotten myself into?”

Chapter Twelve

Mario Bonavente stood outside the glass, staring at Elohim for the longest time. Elohim sat still, as he generally did, gazing off into the distance. He rarely even shifted in his chair. “Fascinating,” the Cardinal muttered to no one. After several more silent minutes, Mario turned to Reese and said, “You must accompany me in.”

“But, Cardinal, I mean Mario, Elohim will speak of things in your life that only you know. There were details of my life I did not share with you earlier, details Elohim disclosed to me. If you go in alone, he will respect your privacy.”

“I know. I have already heard about the monitor speakers going dead at selective times. Reese, I am sure there are some aspects of my life that would be embarrassing if discussed. I do not have the impression that Elohim merely wants to embarrass. If there is anything else he feels should be brought out, I have no problem with you being present to hear it. I would prefer that to not having a witness.”

“Very well.” Reese turned and glanced at Claire, who smiled at him lovingly. “Let’s go.”

Reese entered the room first, with Bonavente following behind. “Elohim, this is Cardinal Bonavente.”

Elohim looked past Reese, directly at Mario. “I know the Cardinal well. It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Excellency.” He extended his hand.

The priest hesitated, holding back, and said, “Elohim, it is also a pleasure to meet you. I have heard much about you. Because I have heard so much, I ask that you forgive me for not taking your hand at this time.”

Dropping his hand back to his side, Elohim said, “Of course, you wish to remain objective.”

“I do.”

“That is understandable.”

“And there is another reason.”

“And that is?”

"If you are who you claim to be, I am not worthy of touching your hand. If you are not, I have no desire to."

Elohim took his seat. "My child, if or when you reach the conclusion that I am your Creator, you are more than worthy. Please, sit."

Reese and Mario sat across from him. Elohim spoke first. "Cardinal Bonavente, how would you have me answer your prayer?"

Mario raised an eyebrow quizzically and asked, "I'm sorry?"

"You prayed to me just before you came in. You confessed your sins and asked my forgiveness. Cardinal, your sins in any other man would be virtues and need no forgiveness. You prayed to my Son, asking Him to give you the strength to fulfill your responsibilities to the Church honorably. You prayed asking me to have mercy on Kerry Coughlin. You prayed…asking me to give you the wisdom to know what to do and to know if you are being deceived. I ask again, how would you have me answer your prayer?"

Elohim's words did not fluster the Cardinal. With a slight smile on his face, he replied, "I ask you to grant them, as you always have."

Elohim laughed, a deep and hearty laugh. "Cardinal Bonavente, you have always been one of my favorites." Turning to Reese, Elohim explained, "From the time that Cardinal Bonavente was just Mari, a precocious seven-year-old in Philadelphia, he has played a game with me. If he found a discarded baseball mitt in a trash can, he would take it home and hide it under his bed. At bedtime, as he said his prayers for his mother, he would ask me for a baseball mitt. The next morning he would pull it out from under his bed and show his mother that God had answered his prayer, 'as He always had.' All through his life he has done the same thing…asking for the intelligence to pass an exam, the strength to excel at a track meet, the courage to face the unknown…all of which he already possessed. And after each successful test of his intelligence, strength, or courage, he would pray to me and thank me for answering his prayers…as I always had."

Turning back to Bonavente, Elohim said, "Bless you, my son. You have given me great joy for these many years."

"Elohim, the joy has been all mine. It appears that my joy may be coming to an end."

“An end? Surely you do not believe that you will not join me in Heaven?”

“I trust in Your judgment; if that is my fate, then so be it. But I have not lived my life solely to earn that reward; I have dedicated myself to being Your servant. Serving You and my Lord, Jesus Christ, has been rewarding beyond my ability to describe. I never dreamed that You would come during my lifetime and end my work when there is still so much to do.”

Tears welled up in Elohim’s eyes, overflowing and running down his cheeks until they fell to the table. Reese watched as Mario reached across the table and touched the small puddle with his fingertip, raising it to his lips. After tasting the tears of Elohim, the Cardinal rose from his seat and walked around the table until he was at Elohim’s side. He knelt before him and bowed. Elohim reached out, still tearful, and extended his hand to the holy man. Reese watched as Cardinal Bonavente took the hand of Elohim in his own and shuddered with ecstasy.

א

Dexter Mills was at his desk, remote in hand, riveted to the cable news channels. Ever since Archbishop Coughlin’s statement, all of the stations had been obsessive/compulsive about the story, endlessly repeating the few tidbits they had in an effort to get it just right. Other than the Margo Jackson press conference, which did little to confirm or deny any of the theories flying about, the media had been unable to find any source who had direct knowledge of this Elohim. Even prior to Jackson’s announcement, Dexter was already certain that Reese was involved. Now that his involvement was confirmed, all of the stations, mainly due to the lack of information on Elohim, turned their attention to Reese.

It seemed to Dexter that every person who had ever been a critic of Reese Johnson had been found by one of the networks. His books were picked apart with many statements taken out of context, making them appear inflammatory when they were not. The Harvard incident was rehashed repeatedly and inaccurately. None of the interviews included

anyone from the Harvard administration who could have shed light on the actual events.

One of the broadcast networks suddenly switched to an "expert" who intrigued Mills. He turned up the volume. "With us now is Jason Petrick, a clinical psychologist who specializes in rescuing and de-programming cult members. Jason, I understand that you are familiar with Reese Johnson's involvement in the Awakening of the Spirit cult."

"Yes. Early in my career I helped many of the members of that cult recover from the experience. I was part of the team who went in after the Reese Johnson incident."

"There are many people who have not heard about this aspect of his life. Could you give us the history?"

"I'd be happy to. Reese Johnson was identified early on as an exceptional and gifted child. His IQ was measured to be in excess of 200 when he was in middle school. When school officials contacted Johnson's parents, suggesting special programs designed for the gifted, they declined and shortly thereafter removed him from the public education system completely. At first he was home-schooled. During that period, when Johnson was sixteen, his parents, through a friend, were exposed to the Awakening of the Spirit cult and its leader, Reverend Hawk, whose real name was Wilber Semple.

"They became captivated, both literally and figuratively, by Hawk and his teachings, and sold their home, cars, and other belongings, giving all of their assets to the cult leader. That, in and of itself, is not unusual within many cults. What was so unusual was that they also gave their son, Reese Johnson, to Hawk. They actually signed papers allowing Hawk to adopt him."

"Unbelievable that any parent would do that," said the reporter.

"Yes, it is. It seems that the cult leader was fascinated by Johnson and by his intellect. He felt that Johnson would be a tool, a device that would enhance his cult and his own grandiosity. Although rebellious at first, Johnson had a sudden reversal, embracing the teachings of Hawk. Everywhere that Hawk was seen, Johnson was at his side. He began filling in for Hawk…holding classes, preaching sermons…and here is where it

became interesting. Ever so gradually, in one-on-one meetings with the cult members, in sermons and in the classes, Johnson, beginning subtly but escalating, began to turn the cult against Hawk."

"Hawk didn't notice?"

"He did. But Johnson convinced him that all great masters, leaders, and gods reached their true destiny, their deserved pinnacle of power and fame, by allowing alternate views, even criticism, and that tolerating those views would make Hawk stronger."

"So, he manipulated Hawk's ego?"

"Precisely. By the time that Hawk realized what was happening, it was too late. The group had not only turned away from him, they had begun to hate him. The local police were called by Johnson and asked to bring out buses and paramedics. When they arrived, Johnson had led the entire group outside the gate of the compound. As the former cult members were prepared for de-programming by my group, we discovered that our work had already been done by Reese Johnson. They were all, without exception, mentally ready to rejoin society."

"Amazing!"

"Oh, it's more than amazing. Cults spring into existence as the result of a charismatic personality. That personality is so powerful that the members feel as if he is a god. For someone, anyone, to come into a group and co-opt that station in the minds of the followers is boggling. When we de-program cult members, it sometimes takes months to free a single member from attachment to the former leader, and our success rate is only sixty to seventy percent. Reese Johnson released them all, and did it without replacing Hawk with himself in their minds."

"What happened to Johnson's parents?"

"When the police searched the compound, they found Johnson's parents huddled with Hawk in a small shack. Johnson apparently made no effort to de-program his parents. Within a month of the breakup of the cult, his parents committed suicide. They left a note saying that they could not continue to live without Hawk. Hawk, of course, was in custody at that point, facing trials for the sexual abuses that he inflicted upon the female children of the cult members, all with their parents' blessings."

“A fascinating story, Jason. How do you explain Johnson’s coup?”

“I can’t. What he accomplished is contrary to all of my own experience and training. I had several conversations with Johnson. His explanation was that he just watched Hawk and learned from him, that it was like a game. He just played the game until be became better at it than the teacher. Once he reached that level, he said that he just changed the rules.”

“It seems there would have been a lucrative career for Johnson dismantling cults.”

“He has shown no interest in the field. He walked out of that compound without parents, a home, money, or any other tangible assets, with only his girlfriend Claire who later became his wife, and he rejoined society. They both found jobs, went back to school and eventually received degrees in their fields, had two children, and never looked back. I have attempted to contact Doctor Johnson many times since then, asking for his help with other cults, and he has always respectfully declined. I guess I can’t blame him. I’m sure that he doesn’t want to relive that ordeal.”

Dexter switched off the television, realizing he was late for a class.

א

Reese had walked Cardinal Bonavente to the elevator earlier and was, once again, in the break room, this time with Margo Jackson, as well as Claire, Reynolds, and McWilliams. Margo remarked, “Reese, I watched as the Cardinal touched Elohim. It almost looked as if he was feeling electricity. What’s it like?”

“Well, for one thing, I believe that it’s different for each person. From what I saw, when he touched Coughlin, it looked painful, almost devastating. When he touched me, I can only describe it as pure, unadulterated joy.”

McWilliams joined in the discussion. “With me it was hope. When I met Him, I hadn’t even realized how much hope I’d lost. Living in that wheelchair…I’d given up on so many things, things that made life wonderful. I substituted wisecracking for happiness, voyeurism for actually living. Just kept substituting and sublimating until I was miserable and

didn't even know it. When He touched me, I felt the hope and anticipation about life that I hadn't felt since I was a child and everything was possible."

Jackson looked at Reynolds, who said, "Don't look at me; I haven't had the privilege yet."

"Neither have I," Claire joined in, with a slight wistfulness in her voice.

"I have an idea," suggested Reynolds. "Why don't we put him in the hallway, and we can all line up and get our touch."

Margo said, "I'd probably go for that. If you think about it, I guess it's another test. If good people get a wonderful sensation and bad people get one that's miserable, there would be a lot of people who wouldn't want the touch."

Claire asked, "Do you think so, Margo? I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think most bad people think they're bad. The three of you see lots of bad people, right?"

Reynolds answered, "Right. They're self-righteous, angry, delusional, paranoid, and more…but they rarely see themselves as bad."

"True," McWilliams agreed. "Even the ones who do grapple with the reality of their deeds tend to blame it all on some external influence, like their skin color or their parents. They don't come to the conclusion that it's just who they are."

Claire went on to say, "I also don't think ugly people think they're ugly, or rude and obnoxious people think of themselves that way. And the ones who bug me the most" – she chuckled – "are stupid people."

"Oh, I know," said Margo. "If they would only acknowledge the people around them who are smarter, and defer to them. Instead, they each offer up an opinion as if it's solid gold, as if it is equally as valid as mine."

"You know," said Reynolds, looking thoughtful, "all of us in this room, with the possible exception of Claire, are dumber than Reese by the same number of IQ points, or more, as a so-called stupid person is dumber than we are. Yet, we all feel equal to him. We don't just defer to him because of that."

"Well, you should," Reese joked.

Laughing, Reynolds continued, “It’s probably the same thing all the way down the ladder…you know, very easy to recognize stupidity from above, tough to recognize it at around your own level.”

McWilliams, pointing his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the interrogation room, said, “Imagine how He feels.”

The conversation stopped briefly, all of them, in their own way, trying to visualize themselves from Elohim’s perspective. The silence was broken by Margo who asked Reese, “What’s our game plan between now and two o’clock tomorrow?”

“I have some more I’d like to talk to him about, but I’d like to get a scientist in here.”

“You’re a scientist,” said Margo.

“Not what I mean. I’m talking about a physicist, a cosmologist…Carl Sagan, if he were still alive, but that type…someone with good credentials, someone moderately well known but not a media whore, and one of the few in the field with an open mind.”

“That eliminates everyone I know,” said Claire.

“There is someone, and he is in D.C. right now,” said Margo. “Let me see what I can do while you go back in.”

“All right.”

ℵ

Cardinal Bonavente was sitting at Kerry Coughlin’s desk, using the local diocese office to call the Vatican. Attaché Bishop Kent had just come on the line.

“Mario, do you have news?”

“I have met Him.”

“And?”

“Bill, I cannot begin to describe the experience. He even described my prayers.”

“Could it be mind reading?”

“Bill, He described my prayers to Him when I was a small boy. If He read my mind, He read all of it, not just what I was thinking at the time.”

“Interesting. What else?”

“At the end of our brief meeting, He touched me. I had been told that when He touched Kerry, it nearly killed him. Yet, when He touched Reese Johnson, it was a wondrous experience. I did not know what to expect.”

“What did you feel?”

“It is not what I felt, exactly, it was what I saw. There were many faces, all happy, all smiling at me, looking at me with love in their eyes…and I knew them all. They were friends, parishioners, those whom I counseled throughout my life. I felt their love. It was overpowering.”

Bill Kent was not sure what to say. The emotion in the Cardinal’s voice was contagious. He could feel his throat tightening.

Mario continued, “He wept. When I talked of my joy from serving Him, He wept. I tasted His tears, Bill. They were sweet.”

After a moment, Kent found his voice. “I have spoken with His Holiness. He fears that it is a trick.”

“I discussed that with Reese Johnson. He broached the subject, asking me how he could determine if Elohim was God or Lucifer.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him the only way that I know, the Rites of Exorcism.”

“You know that might not work.”

“I know. I did not tell Johnson that. If it is the fallen angel himself, we might not succeed in casting him out, but I believe that he could not endure the ritual without betraying himself.”

“That may be true. What are your feelings on this man, Mario?”

“He has convinced me. Either He is our God, or I am a fool.”

“You are not a fool, Mario.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

“I will meet with His Holiness again to share the details of your visit, as well as your opinion, if you don’t mind.”

“I am the servant. Whatever I have is offered, including my humble opinion.”

“We’ll talk soon. Blessing to you.”

“And to you.”

א

Reese returned to Elohim, taking the seat last used by the Cardinal.

“There is talk of moving you. Do you mind?”

“No, I will go where you need.”

“In my talk with Cardinal Bonavente, I asked him the same question that I asked you: how can I determine that you are not the devil? It is quite a paradox.”

“Did he give you the answer?”

“He did. He said the only way that he knew was….”

“Reese, your discomfort is quite unnecessary. I am certain that he mentioned an exorcism. To not give that answer would have been senseless.”

“What are your thoughts on that?”

“You live in a world where doubt and skepticism serve you well, so do not be ashamed of your doubts. One man can see and smell an apple, decide it is an apple, and eat it. Another will not trust his eyes and his nose. He will require proof that it is an apple. The first man trusts his senses, trusts himself, and decides. The second man does not. If the fruit poisons the first man, fate proves him a fool and the second man wise. If the second man dies of hunger waiting for his proof, then he is the fool. Reese, which are you?”

“According to legend, the Aztec emperor Moctezuma believed the prophecies of Huemac, who told of the imminent arrival of the god Quetzalcoatl. When Cortez arrived in Mexico with an army much smaller than that of the Aztecs, Moctezuma believed it was the foretold arrival of their god. Rather than resisting, he welcomed them into his very palace. The Spaniards soon massacred the Aztecs, holding Moctezuma under house arrest in his own palace, and devastated their civilization.”

“The actual events were not nearly that dramatic; however, I see your point.”

“Elohim, I will give you essentially the same answer that I gave to my wife. I believe that You are God. I personally have no doubt. Yet I’ve been asked by my government to provide a professional authentication, much as

a paleontologist may be asked to authenticate that a small piece of bone is from a tyrannosaurus. He may believe it from the moment he sees it, yet he must go through the steps before his certification has any value. If Moctezuma had asked his priests or advisors to confirm that Cortez was Quetzalcoatl, that civilization might have been saved. The most difficult aspect of all of this is that the paleontologist has steps and guidelines already established for his confirmation, and I have none. I'm making this up as I go along. And that is not conducive to creating a comfort level." Reese paused for but a moment, then plunged on, "Elohim, if asked, will You participate in an exorcism?"

"Reese, my friend, if you require it, I shall do it, confusing as it may be."

"Confusing?"

"You have not attended the ritual, so you do not know. The majority of the ritual relies upon the priest beseeching me to intervene on the behalf of the possessed and cast out the demon. The prayers within the ritual not addressed to me are directed to my Son."

"I can see how that will be a bit confusing."

Smiling, Elohim said, "I'm certain that we can find our way through."

א

William Stavros watched the wall of flat-screen TVS, waiting for something to catch his attention. Each set was tuned to a different news source, the sound only reduced, not muted. His office seemed to hold a crowd, all talking in murmurs. As his eyes flicked from one screen to the next, his attention was grabbed by one of the cable networks. Using a modified laser pointer, he selected that set, raising the sound for it while muting the others.

"We have just learned from an unnamed source that Catholic Cardinal Bonavente was invited to meet with the mysterious Elohim. Apparently that meeting took place this afternoon, and the Cardinal has returned to the offices of the Washington, D.C. diocese. We have attempted to reach Bonavente for comment but have not been successful. Archbishop Coughlin

remains in seclusion after his earlier statement, and no other spokesperson for the Church has been made available for questions. Lou, back to you."

The cable news anchor reappeared on the screen. "Thank you, Tom. We have in our studio Rabbi Leo Schmidt, a member of American Rabbinical Counsel. Rabbi Schmidt, I know that the internal working of the Catholic Church is not your field, but do you have any comment on what you have heard so far?"

"Well, Lou, events so far have been pretty astounding. A leading figure of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Coughlin, announces publicly that God has arrived on Earth to judge us all. He then goes into seclusion. The Director of the FBI, after meeting with this Elohim, has taken a leave. The Catholics have now apparently gotten a cardinal involved. It appears…."

"Rabbi," interrupted the newsman, "I'm sorry to cut in, but we have a new development to report. We take you to Stacy Walker at the Hoover Building. Stacy?"

Stacy Walker was standing on the front steps of the Hoover Building. "Thank you, Lou. As you know, I've been covering the FBI for several years now. While covering the Starlight serial murders, I became well acquainted with Craig McWilliams, the head of the profiling unit at the agency. During that case, McWilliams held several press briefings. I'd like to show you a video from one of those briefings." A video of McWilliams, navigating his wheelchair into position behind a bank of microphones, appeared on the screen. Stacy Walker's voice continued over the video. "As you can see, Agent McWilliams is in a wheelchair. Twenty years ago he was shot during a drug raid, and his spinal cord was completely severed just above the waist." The video stopped, and the shot of Walker returned to the screen. "As a result of the Christopher Reeve accident, most of us have learned that there is still no treatment for a severed spine. Some doctors believe that stem cell research may eventually provide one, but there is nothing that can be done today, especially for a spinal injury that is twenty years old. Here is another video, shot today, right on these steps." The same area where she now stood flashed on the screen, showing McWilliams, Reynolds, and Lynn Sheffield talking hours ago. McWilliams' face was clearly visible before he turned and walked up the steps with Reynolds.

Walker, for full effect, allowed the clip to run with no sound and no voice-over, waiting until McWilliams entered the building doors and could no longer be seen.

"Our videographer recognized Agent McWilliams, as he stopped to speak with someone on the steps earlier today, and shot this footage. When I saw it, I called Craig McWilliams for an explanation. I did reach him, but all he would say was 'No comment.' I have also attempted to get more information on this from several members of the FBI. They have all refused to comment or appear on television. We have also been unsuccessful in obtaining an interview with Dorothy McWilliams, his wife. Lou, that is all I know about this right now."

The TV was again filled with the face of the anchorman. After a moment's pause, he said, "That is, well, *astounding*, I guess would be the word." Remembering the Rabbi sitting to his left, the anchor asked, "Rabbi Schmidt…a miracle?"

"Lou, I wouldn't for a moment question the facts that your reporter has just shown us, but before I comment, I think that perhaps I should…hold off. There is much here…to be explored." The Rabbi looked as if he could not wait to get off the set.

"That's quite understandable, Rabbi." Turning to face the camera, the anchorman said, "We're going to take a brief break. We'll be right back."

א

Stavros punched the channel back into the quiet mode and swiveled around to his keyboard. Selecting the distribution list "A" from his e-mail program, he began to type.

Minutes later, Shelby Gentry's laptop, wirelessly connected to the hotel Internet, emitted an audible alert tone. Still in the shower, she did not hear the message arrive.

Chapter Thirteen

Reverend Ralph Potter was just sitting down to dinner with his wife, Bea, when there was a knock at the door. “Who could that be?” he said. The knocking came from the kitchen door, and he went to let in the visitor. Opening the door, he found Simon Treadle, one of his parishioners, standing at the bottom of the steps. “Simon, good evening. What brings you here tonight?”

“Uh, Reverend. We just wanted to talk, you know, with all that stuff on TV. Just wanted to talk.”

“We? Who else is with you?”

“Well, Reverend, you should come see.”

The living quarters for the minister were built onto the back of the small church. Reverend Potter went down the steps and followed Simon around the corner. Bea was close behind. Standing on the grass in front of the church, in the dark, were about thirty people. The minister could see more coming down the road toward the church. Turning to Bea, he said, “Honey, you’d better put dinner up for a while and get my coat. I need to open the church.”

ℵ

Marvin Gross leaned back in his cubicle and whistled, not believing his eyes. Marvin worked for the hottest search engine company in the world. Millions of PCS, laptops, and cell phones used their services every hour. Marvin was one of an army of technicians who kept it all running, solving routing problems, fixing denial of service attacks, and the like. “Hey, Pete! C’mere. You gotta see this,” he called to the tech in the next cube. As Pete came around the corner, Marvin put one tennis shoe on the edge of his desk and sent himself rolling backward so his buddy could see the screen.

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah. Literally.”

They were watching a tracking module that, when called up, gave them a running total of requests for a specific search. The search request at the top of the screen was “elohim,” and the total was mounting so quickly that the last six digits were a flicker.

“It’s gonna break the record,” said Pete.

“Think so?”

“Hell, yeah!”

“Bet you a Starbucks.”

“You’re on.”

א

Brad Dillon sat at his desk, exhausted. He usually got up early enough to work the Euro market, handle the New York Exchange and NASDAQ during the middle of his day, and stick around late enough to at least place a few trades on the Japanese board. It made for a long day, but he figured he was young and making a killing, so why not? There would be plenty of time to rest on some beach when he hit thirty-five.

Right now, all five of his lines were blinking, and he ignored them all. Everyone wanted to sell. Everyone wanted to get liquid, today, now. Clients were closing out their margin accounts to free up their cash. Nothing he said to any of them did any good. Almost none of them would say why; they were ashamed to say why. But he knew. It was this Judgment Day thing. What good would stocks do you if the world was ending?

Dillon opened his desk drawer and pulled out a pack of Winstons that had been there for the two years since he quit. ‘They should be pretty ripe by now,’ he thought, lighting one up. He took a deep drag, trying hard not to cough, closed his eyes, and let it out slowly. ‘Damn, it still helps!’ With a few keystrokes, he checked his own account, jotting down his balance on a lined notepad. Taking one more hit of nicotine, he reached over and punched one of the blinking lines, hanging up immediately. With the line cleared, he punched it again, dialing. By the end of the call he had cleaned out his cash reserve and acquired as much gold as it would buy.

Feeling that he had finally done something productive today, he selected another line and said, “Dillon.”

א

Angie Hoffman glanced over at the triage area. It was empty. The fifty-plus seats in the waiting room, which were normally all filled, were occupied by a total of three people, two parents with a small child who was running a fever. “Lucinda, why don’t you and Thomas take off?”

Lucinda was one of the RNs assigned to the Emergency Room, and was sitting at the admissions desk, reading an old issue of *People*. Slapping the magazine down on the counter, she said, “You don’t have to tell me twice. Man, this is quiet.”

“It’s weird,” Angie agreed. “What do you think is going on?”

Thomas, an LPN sitting in one of the patient chairs across from Lucinda, said, “Everybody’s staying home. It’s like they’re all waiting for a meteor or something.”

Lucinda asked, “Do you believe this guy?”

“Man, I don’t know. If he’s not God, after what he did with that Fed in the wheelchair, he’ll put us out of business.”

“I’m not joking, Thomas.”

“I know. It’s just…I mean, archbishops don’t just freak out, you know?”

Lucinda stood up. “Well, whatever it is…I get an evening off, and I’m going for it. Angie, if it does get crazy, call me on my cell. I’ll be sober.”

“All right. Have a good night, guys.”

א

Danny Cho gently swung the patrol car around another corner. “This is strange, Tommy.”

His partner, Tom Harney, agreed, “No kidding. I’ve never seen it this quiet.”

Their assigned district was in one of the tougher areas of Cleveland, normally bustling with hookers, dealers, and their ilk. Tonight, it was not exactly deserted; there were plenty of people on the streets, but it was different.

“Look,” said Harney, “there’s Mendy. Check it out, man.”

“I didn’t know she owned a regular outfit!”

Mendy, a seventeen-year-old prostitute whom they had busted more than once and who was usually attired in a leather micro-mini skirt and halter top, was walking briskly, eyes straight ahead, wearing a flowered-print dress that extended down to mid-calf. Even the neckline was high. Danny pulled over to the curb and slowed down to pace her.

“Mendy,” called Harney.

She stopped, noticing them for the first time. Even that was bizarre, thought Danny, as she normally scrutinized the traffic constantly for johns and cops.

“Hi, guys!” she responded, sounding genuinely glad to see them.

Danny braked the car so they could talk to her.

“New look for you. What’s the deal? You have a customer who’s into librarians?”

Laughing, she said, “Nooooo! I’m going over to Saint Mark’s,” referring to the church five blocks away.

“You? Church? Right. Besides, it’s not Sunday.”

Still smiling, she answered, “They opened up tonight. A bunch of people from the neighborhood are going there. You guys oughta come.”

“Love to, but we’re working.”

Twisting her head around to survey the block, she said, “Like that’s needed!”

Danny leaned over to comment, “You’re right, Mendy, it is quiet. Want a ride?”

Laughing again, she joked, “It’s not like I’ve never been in there before.”

“It’s true. Come on. We’ll drive you there.”

“Sure.”

Harney jumped out and let her in the back seat. He noticed as she climbed in that there was no suggestive flash of leg, as would normally be the case. She sat first, then gathering her dress around her knees, swung

both legs in. ‘Just like my wife,’ Tom thought. For some reason, this tiny act buoyed his heart.

א

Scott Branson was working overtime, on his twelfth hour so far. ‘What the heck,’ he thought, ‘it’s time-and-a-half.’ Branson, an electrician, was working late to finish a new supermarket that was supposed to open by the weekend. The city inspector was scheduled for tomorrow, and Branson still had three panels to put together.

Sliding the feeder into the socket, he tightened the lug. Maybe it was because he was tired or his mind was elsewhere, but he kept torquing the lug until he felt it suddenly slip. “Shit! I stripped it,” he admitted to no one. He knew that the only way to correct the problem was to pull out everything he had done and replace the buss. “Screw it,” he decided aloud, thinking to himself that he would just leave it in. It would be a few months or even a couple of years before it became a problem. He would be long gone. What did he care?

As he grabbed the next feeder and started to slide it into position, he thought about the stripped lug gradually loosening until it would arc, possibly starting a fire. The building would be occupied by then – employees, the public. Lots of people.

“I don’t know what has gotten into you, buddy boy. Next thing, you’ll be helping old ladies across the street,” he said to himself, starting to undo all of the connections. Punching the speed dial on his cell phone, he called his boss at home to tell him he was going to need another buss first thing in the morning when the parts house opened.

א

Jeanne Langly used her key to get into the Crisis Hot Line office. She was a volunteer for the evening shift on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. She saw that all of the others were already at their desks, but no one was yet on the phone. “Lettie, how goes it tonight?” she asked her desk mate of the last two years.

“Quiet, so far. How are you, girlfriend?”

“Good. What do you think of this Elohim thing?”

“It’s Him, sister. I know it!”

Lettie was always animated. It was part of what made her so good on the phone with the suicides who called. She would get people on the phone who were at rock bottom, and within half an hour, they would be laughing. Jeanne asked, “How do you know it?”

“Did you see that bishop’s face? That was all I needed to see.”

Jeanne started to respond, when her phone rang. She snatched it up on the first ring, saying, “Crisis Hot Line, this is Jeanne. Can I help you?”

The voice was male and faint. Jeanne pressed the phone hard against her ear, plugging her other ear with her finger so she could hear. “I need to talk.” She glanced at the caller ID box next to her phone, to make sure that she could get a good address just in case.

“That’s what I’m here for. What’s your name?”

“Carl.”

“Hi, Carl. What do you want to talk about?”

“God’s here.”

“I heard about that. Do you think it really is God?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Staining to hear his soft voice, Jeanne cranked the volume up on her phone to the max setting.

“Why do you think so, Carl?”

“I jus’ do.”

She noticed that he was slurring his words. “Carl, Have you been drinking tonight?”

“Yeah. Uhmm…yeah, I have.”

“Anything else? Have you taken anything else?”

“Uh, yeah, I have.”

“What have you taken, Carl?”

“Se…Se…Seconal.”

“How many, Carl?”

“A bunch. Uh…whatever was in the bottle.”

Jeanne punched the “alert” button next to her phone. Lettie looked over immediately. Jeanne typed “Seconal and booze” on her computer and tapped the caller ID box. Lettie got on the phone with the police and paramedics right away.

“Carl, why did you take the pills?”

“I don’t want to meet Him.”

“Meet him…you mean God?”

“Yeah.” His voice was getting even more faint. “I’ve been real screwed up…my whole life. I don’t want Him to see me.”

“Carl, you’re going to see Him if you die. I don’t understand. What good does taking the pills do?”

“Oh, ’cause…’cause He’s here now.”

Realization dawned on her. “You mean, Carl, that if you go now while He’s here….”

“I can slip by…you know.”

“Carl, it’s not going to work like that. I mean, He’s God. He can be here and do His job there at the same time.”

“Shit, really?”

“I think so, Carl. I really do.”

Jeanne kept this up with Carl until she heard the door break open. One of the police officers took the phone and said, “Is this the Crisis Center?”

“Yes. This is Jeanne Langly.”

“The paramedics are going to pump him. He’s still conscious. Probably be okay.”

“You’ll let me know.”

“Sure will, and thanks.”

“Thank you for getting there so quickly.”

They disconnected, and Jeanne turned to Lettie. “He wanted to go now, while God was down here.”

Lettie shook her head and sighed.

א

“Ladies and gentlemen, Dan Barton!”

The theme music blared from the orchestra as America's most popular late night talk show host came out from behind the curtains. "Good evening, thank you," he repeated until the applause died down.

"Great to be here tonight. What an amazing day it has been.

"I walked into my office here this afternoon, and one of my interns told me that it was Judgment Day. I didn't even realize this was 'sweeps week.'

"Actually, I watched the tape of the Archbishop's announcement. It looked pretty sincere. I was starting to get worried until I saw that we had Paris Hilton and Madonna booked on the show tonight. I mean, if they're still around, what do I have to worry about?

"Everybody's wondering why this guy is at the FBI. I've got it figured out. No, I really do. They're vetting him for a Cabinet post. The President wants him to run the Defense Department. FBI has to check him out. I mean, we don't want anything embarrassing during the confirmation hearings. Can you see it? 'The chair recognizes the distinguished Senator from the great state of Nevada.' 'Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Elohim, are you now or have you even been responsible for the destruction of entire cities because they pissed you off?'"

א

At Reese Johnson's request, two FBI agents picked up Melissa and Matthew Johnson and drove them to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base for transport to Washington, D.C. Both he and Claire had decided that they should all be together, at least for the next few days.

Exhausted, Reese had given up for the day. The couple were in their room at the Watergate.

"I feel ridiculous coming back here tonight with a 2:00 p.m. deadline staring me in the face."

"I think you need time to think. That, and sleep. You can hit it early in the morning."

A protective detail had arrived in the afternoon to relocate Elohim to the State Department. They had asked Reese if he wanted to go along, but he

declined, thinking that if he was seen traveling with Elohim, it might taint his credibility with the public. Now, he was having second thoughts.

"I guess so. I don't know. When I'm with Him, I don't have any doubts; everything seems really clear. When I get away, I start second guessing myself."

"Reese, honey, we both know how the whole 'charismatic' situation works. They get you in their thrall, and your mind stops working."

Turning to look at her, he asked, "Are you losing the faith here? I thought your mind was made up?"

"No, I'm not losing the faith. I still think He is who He says. I'm just saying…don't blame yourself for being a bit overwhelmed. He is a bit… well, overwhelming."

Laughing, Reese agreed, "That He is, dear. That He is."

Melissa and Matthew arrived late. The FBI agents carried them, sleeping, up to the room where Reese and Claire tucked them in. Exhausted, they also fell asleep immediately.

Chapter Fourteen

As Reese entered the room, he saw that Elohim's accommodations at the State Department consisted of a rich, block-paneled conference room with soft leather chairs that tilted and swiveled. Suspended from the ceiling at the midpoint above the long table was a four-sided multimedia screen with speakers and video cameras integrated into its four corners, in the event that a video conference would be needed.

Elohim sat at the long side of the table, not occupying the head position at either end. Reese noticed that he also had not chosen the center seat on either side, so he had deliberately picked a non-prestigious seat. Reese sat in the chair directly across and said, "Good morning."

"Good morning, Reese. I hope that you and your family slept well."

Chuckling, Reese answered, "Considering that it's five in the morning and we didn't get to sleep until after midnight, I'd say not. Do You not require sleep?"

"I do. I am simply on a different pattern than you are."

"What pattern is that?"

Smiling, Elohim answered, "Yesterday we agreed to resume our conversation on the subject of time at a later meeting. To answer your question, we would have to delve into that topic first. Is that the direction you would like to proceed?"

Tempted, Reese declined, "Actually, no. It's my understanding that they are bringing in a physicist this morning to speak with you…at my request. That discussion may be best left for him."

Reese poured some coffee into the china cup that had been set out for him, adding some sweetener and plenty of cream. He could tell by the cloudy froth rising to the top that it was actually cream and not milk or half-and-half. Taking a sip, he discovered it was delicious.

"This is wonderful coffee. Would You like to have a cup?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, that sounds good."

Reese began to slide the silver service tray across the table, when Elohim asked, "Would you mind preparing it…exactly as you made it for

yourself."

Curious, Reese asked, "You use artificial sweetener?"

"I wish to experience it exactly as you are."

Busying himself with preparing the coffee, he asked, "I am curious about something that has nothing to do with our process here."

"Please, ask."

"If those who are chosen to go with You to Heaven keep their bodies, are there children conceived in Heaven?"

Smiling again, Elohim answered, "Why, yes, there are. It is a great joy for us all."

"It seems that between those who have ascended in the past and the children born of them, You would have a pretty good supply of citizens."

"You're wondering if I've filled my quota," he asked mischievously.

"Not exactly…but, yes. Why continue this…process…here on Earth?"

"I created Earth and all of the life upon it for this sole purpose. In the… process, as you call it, I made a promise to those I placed here and those who followed. I am a keeper of promises. I suppose that it would be reasonable to compare mankind to an experiment created by a vastly superior intellect, only to have the petri dish dumped down the sink when the experiment had run its course. And there are some aspects of that scenario and reality which are analogous. But to continue the analogy, I am then a scientist who has created an environment and a race who, in many ways, is equal to me, much as a parent creates a child. I can no more dump my children down the drain than you could yours.

"Heaven has a capacity for a number far greater than those who reside there now; we are not crowded, and we are in no danger of becoming so in the near future. Additionally, each group who comes to Heaven has new things to offer: the experiences from Earth that have transpired since the last visit, the lessons learned, the progress made. Heaven and Earth are joyfully linked. If the day ever comes when mankind is erased from this planet, it will have been self-inflicted, not due to an act of mine."

"If that occurred, would You reseed…would you re-establish humans on the Earth?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"At that point, the system will have run its course. There would be nothing more to learn, nothing more to gain. Those who might join us in Heaven would add nothing to our knowledge or experience."

"You don't believe that starting over with a completely clean slate would have a different outcome?"

"The Butterfly Effect?"

"I suppose. Chaos theory tells us that even the slightest change in a complex structure will have a tremendous impact on the final result."

"Chaos theory does not tell you that; intelligence, logic, and basic common sense tell you that. Chaos theory is nothing but an ego salve for those who can't admit that they haven't figured it out yet."

"That is a position that only a god or a moron would take!"

Reese whirled around to see who had joined the conversation, recognizing him immediately. Walter Penfield was one of the "superstar" physicists of the day, winning the Nobel Prize for his work on superstring theory. Penfield was also conspicuously absent from the pack of scientists who were signing public letters opposing the teaching of "intelligent design" in schools. In fact, Reese reflected, he could not recall any anti-religion movements in which Penfield participated.

Reese stood and extended his hand, saying, "Dr. Penfield, I've been anxious to meet you over the years."

Penfield shook his hand firmly, responding, "As I have wished to meet you, if only my credibility would have survived the public knowledge of our meeting."

Reese laughed. Turning to Elohim, he said, "This is Walter Penfield. Dr. Penfield, this is Elohim."

As Elohim rose to take his hand, Penfield quipped, "I've already been warned by the female dynamo who works for the FBI to call you Reese. Please, I'm Walt. Elohim, it is a…."

Their hands met. Reese had been watching closely to see the result. Penfield did not convulse or weaken as did Kerry Coughlin. He did not shudder and weep with joy like the Cardinal. His eyes widened, locked upon Elohim's. His muscles tensed, and he became still. The contact lasted

for at least two minutes, with neither moving, both appearing to be statues, so rock solid was their immobility. When Elohim released his grip, Penfield stood still for a few moments, apparently lost in thought. He then turned to Reese and, with his voice substantially softer, said, “Thanks for the warning!”

Laughing, Reese put his hand on Penfield’s shoulder to guide him to the chair. After Penfield was situated, Reese said, “I’ll leave you two alone.”

Elohim protested, “Please, I would prefer that you stay, if Mr. Penfield, I’m sorry, Walt doesn’t mind. Some of the items that I’m sure we will cover will be of interest to you, as well.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

Reese sat next to Penfield.

Penfield started out, “This is a little odd for me. I don’t know if either of you knows this, but I was the second choice for this meeting. Frederick Marshall and I are both in D.C. for a small conference. Margo asked Frederick to interview you and he, at first, accepted. He asked me to accompany him here to facilitate communication. When he became aware of the…uh…situation that developed with Mr. McWilliams, he reconsidered and decided to decline. He and Ms. Jackson prevailed upon me to come in here alone.”

Reese wondered, “Why would he decline, especially because of Craig’s, uh, recovery?”

“He didn’t say. So…you’re stuck with me. As I was saying, this is a little odd. I’ve spent a lifetime trying to unravel the secrets of the universe, and here I am talking to someone who can just tell me how it all works.” He paused for a response but Elohim said nothing, just smiled at him.

When the silence continued for too many moments, he continued, “They attempted to get me in here without any preconceived notions; they didn’t want to tell me what had transpired with each of the interviewers so, I guess, my judgment wouldn’t be clouded. I, of course, refused to participate without a full briefing.”

Elohim finally asked, “Why was that?”

“Any scientist who goes into an experiment, or a situation, without all of the available information is a fool. We’ve all been trained not to allow

our preliminary observations to create any prejudices."

Elohim spoke gently, yet firmly. "So, you believe that you are immune to the realities of being human?"

Taken slightly aback, Walt answered, "Immune, no. Disciplined enough to recognize them and keep them under control, yes."

"Interesting. You believe that you have an open mind about who I am?"

"Yes, I do."

"You don't have a preconceived notion that I'm a nutcase or crackpot?"

Penfield paused before saying, "They did warn me that you have this ability."

"What ability is that?"

"Mind reading, I would suppose."

"We'll address that in a moment. However, those were your words, correct? Before you met me?"

"I believe they were." Penfield was looking uncomfortable.

"Tell me, Walt, how would that be consistent with the vaunted scientific position of objectivity to which you were alluding earlier?"

Penfield did not immediately respond. Elohim continued, "Regardless of how…I believe that your wording was…'fanciful' this flight may appear to you, Walt, it is profoundly serious. I think it is safe to say that it's more serious than any task you have been asked to perform in your lifetime. Within the context of your reality, the most serious of issues are simply life and death. This situation transcends that import by several orders of magnitude. We are dealing with an eternity…a concept that your race has not yet grasped. I have deliberately subjected myself to scrutiny because I know that it is the best course for those who will join me. I would be pleased if your conclusion is that I am as I say. However, the final outcome will be substantially unchanged. If you are capable of truly analyzing me, conjuring up *bona fide* tests to verify that I am as I say, conceiving of questions that will satisfy your 'scientific' requirements, then let's begin. If, on the other hand, you are simply here to verify your foregone conclusion, then please leave."

Walter Penfield reached up and rubbed his face, arms resting on the table. After a loud sigh, he said, "Fair enough. I guess I deserved that."

“You, and your profession, have ‘deserved that’ for a long time. Your peers and colleagues have created an environment that is more narrow-minded and judgmental than the most ignorant of groups have ever managed to produce. Literally tens of thousands of people have reported seeing space ships, and they are all chalked off as morons or lunatics. Even when entire groups of people in the same city see the same thing in the sky, they are ridiculed and disregarded, told that they are suffering from mass hysteria. And yet, a single scientist can see a single blip in his data, a blip which lasts a millionth of a billionth of a second, and he announces that he has found a new element. Is he ridiculed? Hardly…he’s given an award.” Elohim said all of this, not as a rant, but calmly and dispassionately. The effect was more powerful than if it had been yelled.

After some time, Penfield spoke. “If you aren’t happy with me for this interview, I’m sure they can find another person.”

“Actually, Walt, I’m delighted with the choice, despite your off-the-cuff judgments about me before you walked into this room. You actually have managed to avoid the mob mentality within your field and not participate in the orchestrated attempts to destroy the faith of those who believe in me. There have been times, as you have pondered the mysteries of the cosmos, that you have granted the possibility of my existence.”

“It’s true. I have.”

With a twinkle in his eye, Elohim said, “And I have granted the possibility of yours.”

At last, a smile came to Penfield’s face. “And for that I am grateful.”

“If you have decided that you are up to the task of evaluating me fairly,” said Elohim, “then, please, let us begin.”

“Although, in retrospect, I probably wasn’t capable when I walked in here, I think that I am now. I’m still not sure quite how to go about this.”

Reese interrupted, “Walt, I think you’re trying to make it too hard. Remember how you were in college?”

“I was incorrigible in college. I was at the dean’s office nearly every month.”

“Elohim won’t be sending you to the dean. Elohim and I have been talking for quite a while now, and I can tell you it’s pretty painless. Just

pretend that he is a professor and you've finally gotten some one-on-one time. The only difference is…as a student you already knew what the professor, any professor, didn't know, because it wasn't known. That's not the case here."

Elohim was sitting forward in his chair, hands folded on the table in front of himself, waiting. Penfield said, "Well, that's kinda the problem. If I asked questions about things that are known, he…you…might just really know your physics. If I ask about the unknown, how will I know if he's… you're…right?"

Elohim started to speak but was cut off by Reese. "Walt, you're over-thinking it. Ask the damn question!"

"Okay. Umm. God, I'm sorry, gosh, I feel like Alex Trebek." Hesitating to clear his throat, he asked, "All right, what's the *alpha* value?"

Again, Reese spoke first. "Unless both of you want me to just smile and stare blankly through this, please explain your questions, at least a little."

"Okay. The *alpha* value, which is also known as the fine structure constant, is the strength of the interaction between an electron and a photon. It also governs a host of other physical processes. It's just about impossible to write a formula dealing with electromagnetism without the *alpha* value. It also addresses how light interacts with atoms. If *alpha* were slightly different, the universe, as we know it, wouldn't exist."

"Got it. And you don't have this number?"

"For a long time we thought it was 1/137, but it's like *pi*…we keep chasing the number farther and farther out, and only have an approximate value. Close, but still approximate."

Penfield turned to Elohim expectantly.

"Let me answer your question with a question," Elohim responded. "Why do you use a base 10 number set?"

Penfield paused. This was clearly not the response he expected. Reese asked, "What's that?"

Responding to Reese, Penfield asked, "Have you heard of binary numbers?"

"Yes. Like in computers. But I'm not entirely sure what it means."

“Okay, computers only ‘think’ by converting everything into the only states that they can create, on and off. As sophisticated as they have become, they still work that way, just faster. That’s a base 2 number set, and the way it works is like this…imagine there aren’t any numbers past 1. They don’t exist. All you would have to work with is 0 and 1. So, off is 0 and on is 1. The symbol for 0 is easy; it is 0. For 1, you’d have 1. What would be the number for the value of 2?”

Reese thought for a moment, then said, “Well, eliminating all of the other numbers and going up the number line to the next number that had only 0’s or 1’s, it would be 10.”

“Exactly. Then 3 would be 11. And 4 would be…?”

“100.”

“Right. And so on. It gets quite cumbersome for a computer, but it’s the only way that they can think. Beyond binary, there can be a number set for any grouping. So, a base 3 number set would only have 0, 1, and 2, et cetera.”

“All right. I’m with you. So why do we use a base 10 number set?”

Penfield smiled at him. “You know, I’m a physicist and mathematician. I’ve been crunching numbers in more ways than I would have thought possible, and I’ve never asked myself that question. I guess we use that set because we just do. Ten fingers, ten toes, you know. I mean, there are a lot of good reasons. Working in multiples of ten provides us with the ability to extend and extrapolate out to phenomenal numbers fairly effortlessly. It’s intuitive. Our metric system works the same way.” He paused again, thinking. “You know, that all sounds like a load of crap as I’m saying it.”

Reese said, “Whatever base set we were raised with would probably be as natural to use.”

“Yes, it probably would.” Turning back to Elohim, Penfield commented, “I guess I’m missing the point. There isn’t a single value that can’t be shown in any base set.”

Elohim smiled as if he were talking to a child, and said, “Is that true, Walt?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Very well.” As Elohim spoke, he picked up a pen and wrote on a notepad:

base 17 number set - 0.1

Handing the pen to Penfield, he asked, “Could you please write the base 10 number set equivalent of that number, and please, not an approximate number.”

Not bothering to take the pen from Elohim, Penfield muttered, “Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” Reese asked.

“When you are dealing with integers, whole numbers, there is an equivalent number in any base number set, as I explained a minute ago. When you step over to the right side of the decimal point, it becomes a different ball game. What is the value of 0.1?”

“One-tenth,” Reese answered, already understanding. “But 0.1 in base 17 number set is….”

“Right. It’s one 1/17. The base 10 equivalent would be 0.058823529411765… extending to infinity.”

“So there is no way to convert that value to our number set without approximation.”

“No, but it can obviously be represented by a formula, 1/17. And that would be an exact number, not an approximate value.”

Elohim said, “You can only provide the formula because you already know what it is. If you were starting with the infinite number that you described, could you, with certainty, provide the formula?”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“You mentioned *pi* earlier. Mathematicians have struggled for centuries to extend that number out to greater and greater extremes. Has it ever occurred to you that in a different base number set, both *alpha* and *pi* would be simple numbers?”

Realization dawned on Penfield’s face. “That’s a clue, isn’t it. Find the base number set that those two values fit within comfortably, and I’ll find the value for each?”

Elohim nodded, then added, “Unless you would like me to just give you the answer?”

Penfield agonized for only a moment before saying, “No. This is much better.”

Turning to Reese, Elohim said, “Remember in our previous talks, I mentioned that, as scientists have gotten closer to answers, additional layers of complexity have been added?”

“Yes, I recall that.”

“Well, you can see why it’s needed. Walt isn’t nearly as interested in the answer as he is in the process.”

Penfield broke in, “Could you two not talk about me as if I weren’t here. Elohim, you’re saying that layers have been added…essentially right in front of us?”

“Yes, whether it has been at the micro or macro levels. Mankind needs stimulation.”

“You make it sound as though we’re children in preschool. If we don’t have a steady stream of blocks or finger painting, we’ll get cranky?”

“Basically.”

“And the other reason for that is to distract us or sidetrack us?”

Elohim laughed. “The Divinity as a conspiracy theory? I have never needed to distract or sidetrack. I have never needed to conceal or disguise. The ego of scientists has taken care of that for me. The answers have always been available. Whenever any scientist in the past – be that scientist a biologist or physicist, cosmologist or mathematician – has gotten too close to uncovering the truth, he or she has backed away from that avenue, discounting that line of research as a waste of time and resources.”

“You seem to have a real problem with scientists.”

“Scientists seem to have a real problem with me.”

“Science has a problem with the mentality of the religious.”

“In what way?”

“By chalking off everything in nature as being created by God. If that’s the answer, then what’s the point of exploring, examining, and researching?”

“Walt, before I respond to that, let us both agree to dispense with the fanatics at both ends of the spectrum. There are ministers who believe that

evolution should not be taught in schools, and there are scientists who believe that anyone with a belief in me has a mental defect."

"Fair enough."

"Science has a tendency to confuse the understanding of a mechanism with the explanation of how it came to be. Saying that as genes recombine, mutations occur, and the result of those mutations will be further mutations until you have man…so this proves that there is no Creator…is akin to saying that Luther Burbank never existed. Do you believe that the Burbank plum, the russet Burbank potato, or the nectarine would have ever come into existence as a result of random natural selection?"

Penfield responded, "To use the uniqueness of man as a sole justification for intelligent design is flawed. Of course, starting at the beginning, when we are contemplating the first bit of life, the odds are astronomical of Reese Johnson eventually coming into existence. But that argument is like the water in a pond marveling at the incredible coincidence it is that the shape of the pond bottom fits it so well."

"Walt, that is not the point. The uniqueness or complexity of mankind is not the sole justification for the belief in a Creator. The point is this: science has a propensity for extrapolating the minute up to the magnificent. You can send up a satellite that measures the temperature of the upper atmosphere for the first time in history, and after ten or twenty years of measurements believe that you can predict weather trends which span thousands of years. From the time Galileo first peered at the planets through a telescope until today has only been hundreds of years, yet your cosmologists state with undeserved certainty that they understand processes that take billions of years.

"Scientists have long maintained that the rigors of your discipline require verifiable facts and replicable experiments. How can science, if it is to be faithful to these stated standards, take the position that life can spring into existence on this planet unaided and that the number of years which have passed since the first life appeared have been sufficient to allow for the number of genetic mutations to create your current living matrix? Where are your verifiable facts? Where are the replications of the

experiments that led you to this conclusion? That position cannot seriously be taken until you have had the opportunity to test it on another planet."

"Please, wait," protested Penfield, holding up his hands. "I'm a physicist and mathematician, not an evolutionary biologist."

"*That's* your excuse. If you see a fellow scientist breaking the rules, not following the protocols, you keep silent unless it is in your field? Science is science. Too many have watched this abomination and been silent."

"The fossil record presents a strong argument for the progression of life."

"The fossil record presents a history of the stages of life. It no more proves the validity of evolution as the sole engine behind the design than finding a trash heap of old computers, including the XT, AT, 386, 486, and Pentium, and claiming it as proof that computers evolved on their own."

"Are you saying that you tinkered, experimented, and had failures along the way?"

"As I described to Reese in earlier discussions, there was a foundation of life that I created on this planet and that I allowed to develop on its own for millions of years. The epoch of the dinosaur, which lasted far longer than mankind has walked the Earth, serves a purpose today, as do the periods before the dinosaur, and those after. However, when each phase had fulfilled its need, it was removed, clearing the way for the next stage, until the planet was a suitable habitat for mankind. When it was time, I created man and woman. I do not know the future with certainty, as I have explained, so there was a time when I intervened and created a sufficient genetic diversity to ensure that man would not be wiped out by a new virus."

"The races?"

"Yes."

"I would very much prefer to discuss the mechanics of the universe rather than this, but I do have one question. If you created man, why are there chimps – which are so similar to us genetically?"

"There are, at a minimum, two answers to that question. Your friends in the field of genetics, because they have sequenced the genome, now claim to have an understanding of how that particular system works. Sadly, their

true understanding barely rises to the level of perceptible. The genetic sequence is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. That, of course, doesn't prevent them from declaring that they understand it. Each individual gene is capable of a multitude of expressions. To better explain – I'll direct this explanation toward your field – there are approximately three billion chemical base pairs in the human genome. The percentage of those that humans share with the chimp is approximately ninety-eight percent, correct?"

"I believe so."

"How much is two percent of three billion?"

"Sixty million."

"And, assuming that the only differences we need to be concerned with are sequence variations, if each base pair has the capacity for, let's say, one thousand different protein expressions…?"

"The variation level between us and the chimps would be sixty billion expressions."

"Wouldn't there exist a genetic basis for breathing, digestion, production of hair follicles, eyesight, hearing, the nerve structure required for the sensation of touch, as well as the processing of those impulses? In fact, there is a vast, genetic commonality between man and animals that substantially differ from you. This is a result of the necessary genetic blueprint for these and a multitude of other common functions required for living on this planet. Add to that the shared physical traits between man and chimp, and isn't it common sense that two different species that share as many physical characteristics would share a large percentage of the blueprint?"

"Sure."

"Now, to proceed with the second answer to your question, the reason there are chimps is due to evolution."

Reese joined in, "Now you've lost me."

"Evolution doesn't care which direction it goes. There is no 'up' or 'down,' no 'progress'; all that matters is change. The changes occur randomly. If the changes are too extreme, the animal is never born. If the changes are milder, there is a chance for survival. If the changes bestow a

benefit, a new branch of the tree is created. The mistake made by Charles Darwin was that he got it backward. Man did not descend from the ape; the ape descended from man."

"There was a devolution?" asked Walt.

"Again, there is no devolution. That is a man-made, egocentric concept. A transition from man to ape is as much evolution as the reverse would be. Biologists have often pointed out how 'expensive' many of your traits are, from the point of view of survival. When I first created man and completed the changes which resulted in the creation of races, I returned to a 'hands-off' mode, allowing the natural forces to take their course. The product of my creation was scattered over several areas, some rich in resources and comfortable in climate, some not. The groups who faced a struggle for survival continued to progress by developing greater intelligence and many of the other attributes which are considered today to be uniquely human. The groups who lived in a comfortable climate and had plentiful food disposed of the 'expensive' aspects of 'humanness,' shortening the period that the offspring was dependent on the mother, reducing cranium and brain size since they weren't required for survival, and made many other smaller adjustments. This discarding of unneeded traits continued until the animals that you call the ape and the chimpanzee came to be. If you pause to think about this, you'll realize that these beasts still can thrive only in areas that continue to be resource rich and climatically comfortable. They, evolutionarily, chose a path of least resistance and are now so dependent upon these environments that as mankind encroaches, their survival as a species is endangered. Remember, there are no chimpanzees or apes in the fossil record that predate man – yet another fact scientists ignore.

"I gave the group that eventually became the ape a sophisticated brain which it chose to discard, remaining within comfort zones. Mankind, on the other hand, adapted to live anywhere on Earth and, because of the human brain, can survive in the desert or the arctic. To return to your point about the similarity of the DNA…frequently, as traits are lost as a result of evolution, the genes for those traits remain present in the genome and are simply switched off. That is why they are so genetically close to man."

“Wait,” Reese said excitedly. “This all sounds a little bit like the story of Adam and Eve.”

Elohim grinned. “Like organisms, the story of history also evolves. The original story has mutated to its current form. Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge and were banished from Eden, the land of plentiful resources and comfortable climate. Adapting as they moved away from Eden, they became more and more differentiated from the animals… became more and more human.”

Penfield, silent during this explanation, now asked, “This is all fascinating. You’ve created our planet, created the original life, created us, and you’re here today…how old are you?”

Chapter Fifteen

William Stavros' eyes swept the faces of the people gathered around his conference table. It was early morning, still dark outside, and it showed in their dull eyes and blank faces as they sipped their coffee, hoping to wake up. Stavros was irritated at them for their weakness. This was his core team of activists, the cream of his crop, and they all looked like so many pins waiting to be knocked down at the end of a bowling alley lane.

His voice, louder than was needed to be heard, boomed out, "So what are we dealing with?"

No one answered, each hoping that someone else would take the lead. Impatient, he directed his question, "Gentry, what do we have?"

Shelby Gentry, startled, nearly spilled her coffee. "Well, sir," she began, clearing her throat, "they're playing it pretty cagily. The President is sticking to this 'arm's length' position on Elohim."

"Has he met with this Elohim yet?"

"Not that we know of…of course, it's possible."

"Has he met with anyone from the Catholic Church?"

"No. As you know, he isn't Catholic, so I don't think that's the connection."

"Has anyone figured out what's going on with Bill Burke?"

Willy "Wonka" Montgomery, Stavros' Washington, D.C. team leader, answered, "He went home. I mean, that's it. We've been keeping an eye on him, as best we can, and he's at home with his wife. Other than taking walks together, they have stayed inside their house. It's almost like he believes this Judgment Day stuff and is trying to spend as much time as he can with her."

Stavros snorted. "Or that's just part of the plan, to make it look like that!"

Shelby spoke up, "Chief, do you really think the administration would give up one of their top guys during something like this just to create an illusion?"

“I wouldn’t put anything past that sonofabitch!” Turning back to Montgomery, he asked, “Is that cardinal still in town?”

“Yes, sir. He’s taken up residence at the local diocese.”

“Other than diddling some new altar boys, do we have any clue what’s going on there?”

“No, sir.”

“I thought we had an excellent source?”

“We did. He’s…uh…indisposed at present.”

Shelby, listening to this exchange, realized that Stavros’ source must have been Coughlin. That made sense, she thought. Coughlin had been something of a maverick in the Church, supporting gay marriage, opposing celibacy requirements for priests, even showing up at a pro choice rally. An idea started to crystallize. “Sir?” she said, getting Stavros’ attention. “This all sorta makes sense. I mean, Kerry Coughlin was a pretty good friend to our movement. Now it looks like he has been taken out.”

“Shelby, do you think that God came down and punished him? Are you nuts?”

“No. No, I’m not saying that at all! But we haven’t really figured out what is going on. Whatever it is, it’s big, right?” The other nodded.

“Whatever it is, our Idiot-in-Chief might not have wanted Coughlin sticking his nose into it, gumming up his plan.”

One of the others at the table asked, “What did they do, drug him?”

“Who knows?” Shelby answered. “We’re dealing with the FBI, for God’s sake. It could be some bio-weapon they’re working on.”

Another asked, “You think that the FBI slipped some anthrax to a Catholic archbishop?”

“Yeah. I mean, at least it’s possible,” Shelby said defiantly.

Stavros interjected, “Any government that would kill three thousand of its own citizens just so they could start a war for oil is capable of anything.”

Stavros turned to “Sally Fleming” which, Shelby knew, was not her real name. “Sally,” he said, “Do you have any insights for us?”

Clearly frustrated, she answered, “No. None at all. My source is suddenly out of the loop, as well.”

He seemed concerned. “Do you think they are suspicious?”

“Not at this point,” she answered cautiously.

Turning to address the group again, he said, “I am not used to being in the dark. I’ve spent too much money and worked too hard to be suddenly unable to get the intelligence that we need. Does anyone here have *anything* that might shed some light?”

Janet Shuck, who normally worked the west coast and lived in Berkeley, responded, “No insights. I just have a question. Does anyone know anything about this Craig McWilliams?”

Stavros shook his head, saying, “It looks like they are planning on making him the poster boy for this Elohim. That’s a good reminder, Janet. We need to find the guy.”

Willy asked, “What do you mean – find him? He’s right under our noses at the Hoover Building.”

Again, clearly irritated, Stavros answered, “Willy, that’s not Craig McWilliams. I don’t know if it’s an actor…maybe he had a twin…but it’s not McWilliams. McWilliams was a paraplegic, for Christ’s sake!”

“Maybe,” said Shuck, “they’ve been planning this for a while. You know, like a couple of years. That would be enough time for some plastic surgery. Either way, I think he’s the key. The ‘street’ hasn’t been too impressed with the ranting of an obviously nuts bishop, but a guy rising from his wheelchair is getting way too much attention.”

William Stavros thought for a moment. “Janet, you’re right. If we could find the real Craig McWilliams and roll his ass out in front of the TV cameras, imagine what effect that would have on next election. I’m going to devote some serious resources to this, including some investigators.”

Addressing his press liaison, Linda Lincoln, Stavros asked, “What’s the take on this in the newsrooms?”

“A little frustrated,” she answered. “They’re on board, in their guts, but the public pressure is overwhelming. None of them feel comfortable appearing too skeptical. Everybody’s pissed about Sheila’s scoop on McWilliams. It has turned her into an instant star. Now they’re all running around acting like Woodward and Bernstein, looking for another miracle to report. You’ve seen the coverage. Since this thing broke, people all over the

world are coming out of the woodwork, claiming all sorts of stuff, from spontaneous healings to visitations from the Virgin Mary. And the same members of the press, who normally ignore the crackpots, are breathlessly reporting it all. Right now the momentum is on their side."

Stavros shook his head. "This is really clever. I've got to hand it to those bastards. Have god visit just before an election." All watched as Stavros fell silent, his hands clenching and re-clenching, the veins on his temples so visible that the others could have counted his pulse rate, which was obviously sky high. Closing his eyes, he seemed to meditate for a minute before speaking. "We have to get the White House back. We can't let them steal it again." His voice was soft but the intensity was unmistakable. He fell silent again.

No one else spoke for minutes. Eventually, Tom Gleason, the second oldest person in the room, after Stavros, and a long-time activist going back to the anti-war Viet Nam protests, asked, "Mr. Stavros, have you ever considered that this might be real?"

The leader's eyelids snapped open, his gaze fixing on Gleason. "Are you nuts?"

"Well, it's possible," he replied, unintimidated. "Has anyone considered it?"

Sighing loudly, and clearly trying to control his temper, Stavros answered, "On the seventh day, man created god. All religions, all of the bullshit deities of the past, have been methods of control for governments to keep the people in line. The so-called word of god has been rewritten so many times to fit the current political philosophies that it bears no resemblance to the original scripts, if there ever were any. When you don't have enough troops, enough spies to infiltrate your own neighborhoods, or enough technology to watch every move your subjects make, you create a god and tell the people that if they step out of line, they'll go to hell. It extends your presence and has been used by every power-mad king and dictator since the beginning of recorded history.

"Science has explained where we came from. It has explained how the universe started. There are no mysteries anymore that they can point to

from their pulpits to justify the existence of their god. Einstein and Darwin have replaced god, at least in the minds of anyone above the level of moron.

"This *Elohim*," he spat the name out with disgust, "isn't the real thing. He can't be because there is no god!"

א

Pacing in his motel room, Lynn Sheffield took a long hit on the joint. When he first arrived, he was concerned that the maid would notice the smell and get him busted; now he did not care. 'How much worse could things get?' he thought to himself. His unlucky interlude with the Nazi Reynolds, right in front of Shelby, not only ruined his chances of working with the cause, but it was also the reason that reporter got the video of the crippled, or he should say, ex-crippled FBI agent.

The marijuana did not calm him as it normally did. If anything, it made him feel worse. Sheffield sensed that things were at a major turning point in the country, maybe even the world, and he wanted to join the army…the right army…William Stavros' army…before it was too late. He had not even tried to contact Shelby. The look on her face as she backed away from him on the steps of the Hoover Building was message enough.

Dropping heavily onto the bed, he flipped open his laptop and connected to the free wireless Internet. Opening his e-mail account, he found the home page for *takebackourfreedom.com*. Near the top of the page was the "contact us" menu. Pulling it down, he found the e-mail link for William Stavros. The outgoing e-mail form in Outlook popped up, the cursor blinking in the subject line. Taking another hit, he hit the caps lock key and entered "STOP THE BASTARDS." He tabbed down to the text box and typed:

MR. STAVROS, I AM ANGRY BEYOND WORDS AT WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR COUNTRY. SINCE THE SIXTIES, WE HAVE MADE GREAT STRIDES IN FIXING PAST WRONGS. WE HAVE FOUGHT AND DIED FOR FREEDOMS THAT OUR ANCESTORS ONLY DREAMED OF. NEARLY GONE ARE THE TYRANNICAL AND REPRESSIVE LEADERS OF THE PAST. OUR JOKE OF A PRESIDENT,

IN JUST A FEW YEARS, HAS NEARLY TURNED BACK THE CLOCK. IN HIS WORLD, ABORTIONS ARE REMOVED FROM CLINICS AND RETURNED TO BACK ALLEYS, GAYS AND LESBIANS GO BACK INTO THEIR CLOSETS, THE ENVIRONMENT IS DESTROYED SO THAT MORE OIL CAN BE PUMPED AND REFINED, FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS GONE FROM RADIO, TELEVISION AND MOVIES, AS WELL AS THE PUBLIC SQUARE, AND THIS COUNTRY REVERTS BACK TO ITS UGLY HERITAGE OF ADVENTURISM AND IMPERIALISM…ALL IN THE NAME OF GOD. AS HE AND HIS FAT-CAT FRIENDS GET WEALTHIER – THE REST OF THE WORLD HATES US MORE AND MORE, THE POOR IN OUR OWN COUNTRY GO WITHOUT MEALS OR HEALTH CARE, AND THE EXTREMIST RELIGIONS BECOME THE FOURTH BRANCH OF OUR GOVERNMENT. FOR MANY YEARS I HAVE FOUGHT ALONGSIDE MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS FOR THE CAUSE, BUT ALWAYS ON MY OWN. I AM SO FURIOUS NOW, AND SO CONCERNED BY THE THREAT, THAT I BELIEVE NOW IS THE TIME TO JOIN THE ARMY…YOUR ARMY…BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. THERE IS NO TASK TOO MENIAL, NO REQUEST TOO REPUGNANT, NO ORDER YOU CAN GIVE THAT I WILL NOT PERFORM. PLEASE, I BEG OF YOU, TELL ME WHAT I MUST DO TO BE ALLOWED TO FIGHT AT YOUR SIDE.

He noticed that he had left on the caps lock and decided it was fine; it added to the emphasis. Lynn ran spell check and read it over once. The “I beg of you” in the last sentence felt like a bit much to him, but he moved the cursor up to the send button and clicked it.

א

Sheffield’s e-mail found its way through various routers to reach the *takebackourfreedom.com* site in a matter of seconds. It joined the 31,222 other e-mails in the queue that were waiting to be read. A specially designed filter read the body of the text. Finding certain key words and phrases that

fit the profile, it forwarded Sheffield's e-mail directly to William Stavros' mailbox, where it joined a much smaller group of 312 in the queue.

א

Dressed in a simple black robe and sandals, the old man walked the stone corridor alone, on a task that could not be assigned or delegated. He breathed slowly and deeply, trying to pull in as much of the musty smell as he could because he loved the smell in the lower levels. He believed that it was the fragrance of the holy. The scuffing sound of his sandals bounced off the walls and ceiling, not just next to him but from in front and in back. The sound reverberated to and fro, resonated and amplified until it sounded as though there were many who made this trek. He believed that many *were* walking with him.

Arriving at an ancient iron door, he removed the massive key from his pocket. It took the pressure of both hands to turn the key within the lock, twisting until he heard the loud "clunk" of the lock disengaging. With great difficulty, he was able to pull open the door enough to allow him access. Stepping inside, he immediately dropped to one knee and blessed himself, pausing longer to say a silent prayer. He was in the holiest of rooms, a place where few men had even been; he was fulfilling a responsibility and keeping a promise made many years before his own birth. Rising, he placed his torch into the iron holder mounted to the wall. The flames danced across the stone walls, ceiling, and floor, making them all seem alive. Walking with great hesitation, he approached the coffin that rested upon the stone pedestal in the center of the room. The coffin was also stone, carved granite, lovingly crafted by the faithful so long ago. The bottom was chiseled from a single slab, so there were no joints. The top, chiseled from a separate slab, was ground to a nearly perfect tolerance. He could see that there was no gap between the bottom and the lid. The lid overhung the sides by three inches so that a sufficient grip could be established. Carved into the lid was a simple cross.

Asking, yet again, for blessing, the old man went to work on removing the lid. He found that in addition to the perfect joint between the base and

the lid, someone had also sealed the joint with a substance that might have been beeswax. He had brought along a crow bar and, by lifting mightily and inserting the bar, was able to lift one end of the lid high enough for it to clear the notch that the stone masons had chiseled. As he struggled, he reflected briefly that it was fortuitous that this task did not befall his predecessor near the end of his reign. He immediately replaced this thought with the belief that sufficient strength would have been found if it had been needed.

Slowly, lovingly, he rotated the lid to the side. The masons of the day, having received explicit instruction, constructed a stone pillar to the side of the pedestal at the height needed to rest the lid, once swung aside. Retrieving the torch from the wall, the man returned to the now partially open coffin and looked within. He immediately saw the skull, spine, and clavicle. Bending over, he slowly kissed the forehead of the skull, tasting the ancient dust on his lips. Redirecting the torchlight, he found the reason for his efforts. Resting upon the rib cage, directly over where the heart once had beaten, and still clutched by the skeletal fingers, was a wooden box with a rose carved on the lid.

Reaching in with his free hand, he slowly rearranged the fingers so that he could remove the box. Doing so, he placed the box on the coffin lid. He then reached back inside and carefully placed the fingers so they crisscrossed the rib cage. Satisfied that he had conducted himself with the appropriate reverence and respect, he replaced the torch in the wall mount, placed the box on the floor out of the way, and wrestled the lid back onto the coffin.

Chapter Sixteen

Elohim glanced at Reese and said, “It seems that we have finally reached the topic that you and I have planned to discuss. Before I can answer your question, Walt, I will need to explain something about time and the original plan. Let us begin with some basic premises. For the purpose of this discussion, are you willing to grant that I created man in my own image?”

Penfield thought for a moment before responding, “I’m not ready to accept that you are our creator; however, I can easily concede that we are of the same image.”

“That will suffice for now. Can you tell me why biologists have done so much more genetic exploration with fruit flies than with turtles?”

“Yes, even an old physics boy like me can answer that one. Life spans… each fiddling with the genes requires a new generation to be born for you to determine the results of the experiment. The life span of a fruit fly is weeks, and a turtle lives for hundreds of years; therefore, your tinkering can continue for thousands of iterations on the fruit fly, while your grandchildren would be waiting for the results of your first experiment on turtles.”

“Very good. What if you don’t care about fruit flies? What if the only thing that matters to you is the progression of the turtles?”

“Well…you’d have to set up an experiment, leave lots of notes, and hope that future generations would follow up.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. I asked, ‘What if the only thing that matters to *you* is the progression of the turtles?’ How would you solve the dilemma?”

“I don’t know.”

“There is only one other option. You would need to speed up the process.”

“How would you do that? Accelerating the life cycle of the turtle, if it could be done, would probably have other ramifications on the turtle that would be undesirable. It might not be a turtle anymore.”

“That is precisely the point. You would not accelerate the life cycle of the turtle, you would accelerate the environment.”

A look of disbelief came across Penfield’s face. “Accelerate the environment? You mean, like fast forward the tape? You can jump forward in time?” he asked, barely concealing his sarcasm.

“No. I am as governed by the laws of the local environment as you. I cannot ‘jump’ through time.”

Reese asked, “Local environment? Why would you describe it as such instead of saying ‘the universe’?”

Elohim grinned. “Still paying attention, I see. Bear in mind that the Earth and, in fact, the solar system were created strictly for the benefit of nurturing mankind.” Gesturing toward his own torso, he said, “I am as subject to entropy as you. I am aging as we speak, at the same rate as all other things here. Were I to remain here on Earth, I would grow quite old rather more quickly than I wish. In Heaven, I age at a rate consistent with that environment…which is considerably slower.”

Looking more curious than amused, Penfield asked, “So you have slowed down time in Heaven?”

“My dear Walter, either Heaven is slower or the Earth is faster. It really is a relative thing, you know.”

“Very funny. So, what you’re saying is that there is a time dilation and the difference between Heaven and Earth, I can’t believe I’m saying this, is that Earth’s time moves faster than Heaven’s?”

”Time dilation?” Reese queried.

Elohim explained, “Albert Einstein, the dear man, stated that if you had a person on each of two objects, and one of the objects was moving faster than the other, each body would experience a different rate of time passage, with the faster body experiencing slower time than the other.”

“Okay,” Reese said, “I’ve read about this. Is it really the case?”

Before Elohim could answer, Penfield interjected somewhat testily, “Of course it is. It has been proved experimentally.”

“Has it, indeed?” Elohim asked. “Please describe the experiment for Reese.”

“Simple, actually. Einstein calculated the amount of time variance as it relates to *c*, velocity. Put an atomic clock on an jetliner that travels in excess of mach 2 and leave one on the ground. The clocks start out in sync. After the trip, the clocks are out of sync by the value calculated by Einstein… proof.”

Addressing himself again to Reese, Elohim said, “You’ve read enough flawed studies, Reese, to know that a given result does not necessarily provide proof because the actual cause may be something other than that which the experimenter thought.”

Reese responded, “There’s always the issue of a hidden or unknown variable.”

“Yes. In the experiment Walt described, there was, in fact, a slight difference in the time measured by the two atomic clocks – a difference so slight it was only measurable by clocks of that precision. Unfortunately, that only indicates the time variation; it does not indicate the cause.”

Penfield asked, “Well…what else could it be?”

“What it could be,” Elohim answered, “is the actual mechanism that I have employed to accelerate time for the Earth. Walt, imagine a process, if you will, originating near the center of the Earth. That process generates a force which speeds up time. It is proximity-sensitive, so the closer you are to the source, the faster time moves for you – the farther, the slower. If you measure the passage of time on the ground and at thirty thousand feet, would you not get a slightly asynchronous reading?”

Penfield stared at Elohim with disbelief. “A process at the core of the Earth which manipulates time?”

“Yes. And you haven’t answered my question.”

“Well, I suppose if I buy into this theory, yes, the farther from the source the clock is, the slower time would be moving. How would this so-called device work?”

“Walt, I can no more explain the mechanism to you than you could explain the operation of a cell phone to Plato. You do not have the foundation of knowledge needed to discuss it or understand it. However, you already have the knowledge and technology necessary to prove it. In

fact, much of the proof exists. It has simply never been applied to the correct hypothesis. If I may suggest an avenue?"

"Please do."

"But first, theoretically, if time moved faster for you here on Earth, and the rate of time acceleration decreased with distance from the Earth, would a probe launched from Earth be nearer or farther than your calculations predict?"

"Nearer, of course. More time has passed for us than for the probe… good God, you're talking about the Pioneer probes, aren't you?"

"I've read about that," said Reese. "But I don't remember the details."

Penfield explained, "John Anderson at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, in the 1980s, discovered that the probes heading out of the solar system in opposite directions were not as far away as they should be."

"By how far?"

"About equal to the distance from the Earth to the moon."

"Could that be explained by some onboard malfunction?"

"They've looked at heat loss, gas venting, everything they could think of…nothing penciled out. And whatever the malfunction was, it would have had to occur on both of the probes simultaneously and to the same degree."

"Perhaps you could have someone determine the factor of the discrepancy and apply it to the atomic clock experiment…."

"Yes," Penfield interrupted. "That should be simple enough, as long as the decline rate of the time influence is steady."

"It is," Elohim stated.

Penfield rose from his chair, pulling his cell phone out and making a call, turning his back on Reese and Elohim. As he spoke into the phone, Reese said, "I presume they'll match."

Chuckling softly, Elohim answered, "They will. And once he is armed with the factor, there are some other conundrums that have been puzzling him which will also be answered."

Overhearing Elohim's comment, Penfield whirled to face him. "Other things?" he asked, covering the phone with his hand.

Elohim motioned for him to finish his phone call, which Penfield hurriedly did as they waited. Finally, snapping the phone shut, he returned to the table. “What other things?”

“Once a new paradigm is accepted, it opens new vistas. If the Earth is the epicenter of a calculable local time disturbance, a multitude of unsolved questions can be resolved. For example, underground caves have been filled with water and sensors, looking for evidence of neutrinos. They have been detected, but not in nearly the quantity anticipated in your calculations. If time on Earth is substantially faster than the rest of the universe, then….”

“Then the calculations are correct, or could be, depending on the time variance. Our time is just going so much faster that hours, or even days, pass between the detection of each neutrino, when it should be minutes.”

“Or seconds,” Elohim added.

“Seconds? Instead of hours?”

“No. Instead of days.”

Walt Penfield was taken aback. Reese and Elohim watched his face as his mind raced.

Reese asked, “What is the ratio?”

“At present, it is 36,580/1. Early in the process, for a brief period, it was several orders of magnitude greater.”

“WHAT?” barked Penfield. “One of your days is equal to one hundred years on Earth?”

“Approximately, yes. But it is not one of my days…it is a day for the rest of the universe. Remember, you have come to all of your conclusions about the formation, expansion, size, and eventual demise of the universe based upon a time scale that is skewed by an unknown factor. How many of your beliefs about the universe are time-bound?”

“Many of them, hell, most of them. We’ve run into brick wall after brick wall trying to reconcile our observations to our theories; this could explain why. Our observations have been skewed by this time shift.”

Penfield’s cell phone rang. Pulling it out, he glanced at the caller ID, then activated the speaker phone function. Holding it at arm’s length, near the center of the table, for all three to hear, he answered, “This is Walt.”

“Walt, Jason. I finished the first pass on the Voyager comparison. I took the distance of the anomaly and extrapolated the….”

“Jason, bottom line. Did the numbers tie?”

“Yes! Yes, they did. As I said, it’s a rough first number, but it’s dead nuts on. How did you ever think to relate the dilation variation with the Pioneer anomaly?”

“I’ll get back to you on that one, Jason. Thanks for the quick work.”

“No problem. Uh, Walt, is this a paper?”

“Don’t worry, Jason. You’ll get your name on it. Gotta go.”

“Thanks. See you.”

Penfield flipped the phone closed and slowly let out his breath.

“Uhhh…assuming for a moment that this is really happening…that our time is sped up by that factor…how long has this been going on?”

“Since the beginning.”

“For the last four and a half billion of our years?”

“Yes.”

“You mentioned a period when the rate was much greater?”

“Yes, during the creation of the Earth and prior to the creation of mankind, the process was substantially accelerated. I was, after all, anxious to get on with the existence of man.”

“That explains the Creation-in-seven-days timetable?” asked Reese.

“During each of my past visits I explained these things to the best and brightest of the time, as I am explaining now to you. Just as I now cannot literally describe the actual mechanism of the time acceleration because of your dearth of knowledge in certain areas, my explanations in the past, of necessity, utilized available concepts for illustrative purposes. The concept of a day is somewhat subjective yet easily understood. If you consider that we are referring to a ‘day’ in Heaven, rather than on Earth, the description makes more sense. But what was intended as a description of the acceleration of time, unfortunately, became literally interpreted as the timetable for Creation.”

Penfield asked, “Since then, has the rate been constant?”

“Yes.”

Penfield vigorously ran his hands through his hair, disheveling it badly. “I have so many questions…I don’t know which to ask first.”

“I suggest that you start with gravity; it’s difficult to grasp the time concept without addressing it.”

“Gravity is affected?”

“Of course it is. The link between time and gravity is fundamental to the nature of both. If I were to stop the process that is accelerating time, you would not suddenly perceive your ‘day’ to be one hundred years long; it would be indistinguishable from the ‘day’ you experienced before the process stopped.

“To illustrate the impact of this, let’s do a mind experiment. Let’s say there is a location…an island within the solar system that is immune to the effects of the time acceleration. That island is between Earth and Mars, so it is close enough to Earth to view it with the naked eye. With the acceleration turned off, the Earth would appear to orbit the Sun at the velocity you currently perceive. But turn the process on and, from the island’s perspective, the Earth would now be spinning around the Sun at 36,580 times faster than before. If gravity and time were not linked….”

“The Earth would be flung out of the solar system like a slingshot.”

“Correct. Not exactly the ‘weak force,’ is it?”

Reese asked, “I know that I’m the non-physicist here, but hasn’t gravity been the big mystery for your community?”

Penfield responded, “Yes. We’ve never really had any idea how it worked or even what it was.” Addressing Elohim, Penfield asked, “So gravity is linked to time?”

“It would be misleading to answer ‘yes’ to that without more information. Gravity is linked to time; time is linked to gravity. You could almost say that gravity is the physical manifestation of time. The connection between the two is not the end of it. Time and gravity are also connected to the velocity of a body and the speed of light.”

Reese again jumped in. “The speed-of-light paradox. No matter how fast I move away from a source of light, I can never catch up to the light itself.”

“Right,” said Penfield. “In fact, no matter how fast you go away from the source of the light, the light will always close the distance toward you at the same speed, the speed of light.”

Elohim explained, “That’s true, in a sense. In reality, what’s happening is this: If you are traveling in the same direction as light – as you accelerate, time slows down proportionally. So if you are traveling at half the speed of light, time has slowed to half its previous rate. Since you measure the speed of light against your time reference, it appears to be unchanged.”

Penfield interrupted, “But that’s time dilation. I thought you said it didn’t exist?”

Smiling patiently, Elohim explained, “Walter, I did not say it didn’t exist. I merely pointed out that you have not measured it. The jetliner experiment could not work because the orientation was flawed.”

“The orientation?”

“Time dilation occurs in relation to the speed of light. In my example, I choose to move the body away from the source at half the speed of light, which slows time. If the body moves toward the source at half the speed of light, time speeds up for the body by a factor of two.”

“What if this hypothetical spaceship, traveling at half the speed of light, is between two opposing light sources, moving away from one and toward the other?” asked Reese. “Wouldn’t time be speeding up and slowing down simultaneously?”

“Yes,” answered Elohim.

“Yes?” barked Penfield. “What do you mean, ‘yes’?”

Laughing, Elohim answered, “This gets a little difficult to explain, as the three of us do not share a common knowledge of physics. Taking a cue from my Son when He spoke to His followers here on Earth, I will attempt an explanation.”

“Parables,” Reese commented.

“Yes. There were many concepts that He wanted to convey that were quite foreign to the people of the time. As a result, He found it necessary to convert complex thoughts into analogies. Unfortunately, since He left, some of the faithful have believed that His analogies were to be taken literally.

“That being said, I will answer your question. It is necessary, Walt, to imagine each star, each source of light, as a time island – or perhaps a time zone. As you travel from close proximity of one star toward another, the time effect projects out from each.”

“Like two radio beacons,” offered Reese.

“Very good. Yes, like two radio beacons on the same frequency. When you are close to the first star, its effect on your ‘real’ time is more powerful than the effect the distant star has upon you. At the midpoint, the effect on your ‘real’ time would be null. As you approach the other, you regain what was lost from your ‘real’ time during the first half of the trip.”

“But if you observe and measure the light speed from either source, at any point in the trip, would the result always be the same?”

“Yes.”

“How can that be, or is this just another paradox?”

“Walt, whether it is a paradox depends upon your point of view. The reason the light from opposing directions would both be measured at the same speed, regardless of your relative speed, is that you measure it against time…and time is linked to velocity. If you were to represent the linkage – the relationship between them – as an equation, that equation would look like this.”

Elohim once again took pen to paper and wrote:

T (time) = s (speed of light) - v (velocity of observer)

“It is the very ratio between the speed of light and the observer’s velocity that determines the rate of time. The three are locked together. Therefore, the ‘relative’ speed of light, in relation to the viewer, will always be the same.”

“So, it’s an illusion,” said Penfield.

Elohim answered, “If you are referring to time, the answer is, yes, it is an illusion, but only an illusion in the sense that it can be manipulated. All of the various velocities are not illusions; they are, in a sense, real. The reason you are grappling with so many paradoxes is that you have used time as your method of measurement…and time is, shall we say, flexible.”

It was obvious that Penfield was struggling to assimilate this. He asked, “Then what is time?”

“Time, as is all else in the universe, is a form of energy. It is the energy that maintains equilibrium in a system. It is an energy created and released by stars. And, as you already know, energy must be conserved. It is never lost. Each particle in the universe carries this charge. The charge varies with motion – not absolute motion, but motion relative to the light which was created by the same star from which both energies were born. This is a vastly simplified description but, suffice it to say, there is a cost associated with this motion, and that cost is a decrease in field strength of the charge. The faster your motion, the lower your charge, until at the speed of light, the charge reaches zero. What you consider to be time is simply a measurement of that charge.”

Reese asked, “How can we measure something that we don’t know exists?”

Penfield answered, “Black-box physics. The Manhattan Project designed the atomic bomb without having ever viewed the atom. It’s a common methodology in physics. Imagine something inside a black box. You can’t see what it is. You can’t study it directly, but you can study what effect it has on the environment. You can also study what occurs as you heat it, freeze it, bombard it with x-rays, shake it, and perform any other experiment you can concoct. If you do that enough, inductive reasoning will lead you to the point where you can predict what the item in the box will do in a given set of circumstances.”

“Precisely,” confirmed Elohim.

Penfield continued, “I would presume that this energy charge has to do with entropy?”

Reese asked, “Entropy, the rate that everything decays?”

“Yes,” said Elohim. “And, yes, not just the rate of aging within organics. Since every particle is imbued with this charge, every particle is affected. A radioactive particle with a half-life of one thousand years would possess a half-life of two thousand years if its energy state was cut in half, but only if the balance of the environment maintained its current energy value; otherwise, the change to that one radioactive particle would not be apparent.”

Reese groaned. “I’m getting a headache.”

Penfield looked over at Reese and smiled. “You think your head hurts… mine feels as if it’s about to explode.”

“I’m sorry to have this impact. I warned you that we were treading into difficult areas. Just remember that I’ve simplified this.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Penfield responded. “So, Einstein was smarter than we all thought. It really is all relative. It’s just relative to a greater degree than even he thought.” Pausing for a moment, he added, “How’s he doing, by the way?”

“Quite well, actually. And he disagrees with you. It is not to a greater degree than he thought…well, let’s just say that a rereading of his work with this concept in mind might be illuminating.”

Penfield laughed. “I do have another question.”

“I’m sure you have many.”

“Well, yes. But…was he right about what happens to matter upon reaching the speed of light? If entropy slows as the time-energy value is diminished, and the value diminishes with velocity, it would seem that the reverse would be true…that you would have a particle that would last forever.”

“In a sense, yes, he was right. He believed that matter ceased to exist if it reached the speed of light. Because achieving that speed reduces the time-energy value to zero, the particle would become eternal if it could maintain that precise velocity. However, it would remain eternal in the sense that it would be frozen in time, while we, the observers, have moved on. That would render it, from our perspective, out of existence. Because the speed of light is an infinitesimal point on the continuum, maintaining that exact velocity is impossible. You may only approach the speed of light or exceed it. The only way to do this, at present, is by falling into a black hole. When that occurs, the velocity of the matter coinciding with the speed of light is only momentary.”

Reese asked, “What happens next?”

“I’ve already answered that question.”

“You did? When?”

Elohim reached forward and tapped his finger on the written equation. Penfield slid the paper closer and stared at it only for a moment before

exclaiming, “I just assumed the value of ‘T’ was absolute. It isn’t, is it?”

Elohim just shook his head, smiling.

Confused, Reese said, “Walt, could you please explain?”

Penfield looked up at Reese and said, “Okay, ‘T’ is the rate of time. Normally, this would be a positive value. But if ‘v’ – the velocity of the observer – becomes a number greater than ‘s’ – the speed of light – then ‘T’ becomes a negative value!”

Elohim answered without a pause, “As the matter passes the threshold and continues to accelerate, the energy value we are calling ‘time’ begins to rise again, in the negative.”

Penfield, his voice higher, said, “That would mean….”

Reese finished the sentence. “The matter, or the observer, would go back in time.”

“That can’t be!”

“It can be,” Elohim answered, “and it is. Once sucked into a black hole, matter reverses its journey through time, although physically continuing on the same vector in which it arrived, until it encounters something that causes it to slow down below the speed of light. At that point, to an observer who is present in this new time, it appears to pop into existence from nowhere.”

“Zero state,” murmured Penfield.

“Another incorrect conclusion. The quantum mechanics proponents believe that matter pops in and out of existence randomly. In fact, what is occurring is a particle returning to a previous time.”

“So, a particle that comes into existence today is from the future?” asked Reese.

“Yes. At any given moment in the universe there is a vast quantity of matter in transport, so to speak. Because it is not observable by those on this side of the time arrow, it does not exist. However, the gravitational interaction between matter is impervious to its time directionality.”

“It’s the missing matter?” Penfield surmised.

“Missing matter?” asked Reese.

Penfield explained, “If the universe is to eventually collapse into a singularity, there is a substantial amount of matter missing that is needed to provide the gravitational force. Also, there are galaxies that are spinning much too fast to hold together unless there is additional matter to hold them together. We’ve been looking for ‘dark matter’…a material that is unobservable, and yet exerts the required force.”

Elohim added, “Yet, you have observed other galaxies that are not only expanding, but their rate of expansion is accelerating, also. To explain this, you have coined ‘dark energy,’ an undiscovered repellent force. Neither dark energy nor dark matter is required to explain the functioning of the universe.”

“How does what you’ve described explain the accelerated expansion?”

“As I described before, gravity and time are also linked. As time speeds up, as it has here in this solar system, gravity increases to compensate. It is a two-way street. As gravity increases, time accelerates; as gravity decreases, time decelerates. As a galaxy expands, its gravity becomes more diffuse, or diluted. Time compensates by slowing down. To an outside observer for whom time is not also slowing, the rate of expansion seems to be accelerating. No dark energy is needed. No dark matter is needed, partially because of the gravitational influence of the matter that is time-traveling, so to speak. And please, do not forget that your ‘time’ is accelerated. Galaxies are not truly spinning too fast for their own gravitational good; they only appear to be from your ‘time’ perspective. Another factor is further explained by our earlier discussion about neutrinos.”

“Yes, I meant to get back to that…you mentioned that we would get a higher incidence of neutrino collisions if our time wasn’t faster; yet, our time is 36,580 times faster, and our shortfall is only about a third of what we expected. If we plug in the time factor, we’re now getting about 12,200 times more neutrinos than we should? Are there that many more neutrinos?”

“No, they are only a little larger than was thought.”

“You’ve lost me again,” Reese said. “Thought we were detecting all of the neutrinos that arrived.”

“Hardly,” Penfield replied. “Billions of them pass right through us every second. They are so small that almost all of them pass through the entire Earth, colliding with nothing. The way that we detect them is to fill a vast cavern with pure water. As the rare neutrino crashes into a water molecule, energy is released. Sensors detect that release. We can calculate how much emptiness there is in water, and infer the size of the particle by how many of them actually hit something instead of passing right through. If the particle is slightly larger, its tendency to interact…collide…with the water molecules goes up exponentially. Since there are so many neutrinos in the universe, if our calculation of their mass increases only slightly, the sum of their total mass would have a powerful gravitational effect.”

Pausing, Penfield said, “I need a break, breakfast or something. How about you?”

Reese answered, “I wouldn’t mind a Danish, I guess. Elohim?”

“No, thank you. The two of you, please, go ahead. I’ll wait here. I’m certain that getting away from me is a part of the break that Walter needs.”

Penfield chuckled as Reese asked, “That reminds me…is it because you are visiting this…I don’t know what to call it…time rate, I guess, that you do not sleep and rarely eat or drink?”

“It’s true that the entire time I have been here would only be moments in Heaven. The transition is something like jet lag. The longer I remain, the more often I would need to eat, drink, and eventually sleep.”

“Weird!” said Penfield.

Elohim smiled. “Not as weird as superstring theory.”

“Touché.”

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Reese, Claire, McWilliams, and Reynolds were again congregated in a break room, this time joined by Penfield. They each picked a Danish from a platter on the table and began eating.

“Well,” said Craig, “what do you think?”

Penfield looked thoughtful, obviously planning his answer before speaking. “Nothing supernatural that I can prove yet. It will take quite some

time to test everything he told me. And even if it all proves to be true, he could simply be a brilliant theoretical physicist."

"What would it take to convince you?" Claire asked.

"I haven't thought about it. Remember, I wasn't planning on doing this meeting."

Reese said, "From what you're saying, I would guess that any physics solution He gave would fall into that category."

"Probably true," Penfield answered.

"Well," Reese said, "so far, if He isn't God, He's a brilliant physicist, the world's greatest linguist, and a mind reader."

"And physician," reminded McWilliams.

"That's true," acknowledged Reese. "And that touch."

"Yeah, the touch," agreed Penfield. "What's the deal with that?"

"I know the effect it has had on the Cardinal, Craig, the Archbishop, and my husband. For each person, it was different. What did you feel?" Claire asked.

"Boy…it's hard to describe. It was definitely positive. After I heard about the others, I was almost afraid to do it, you know. It was as if…a vast panorama opened in my mind. All of my work, going back to college, was there, but each project, almost each equation, was represented by an object. The mathematical work I did a few years ago on binary pulsars was a patch of infinite darkness with the two blinking stars whirling around each other. I could see the physical manifestation of my calculations. I could see where I had been right and where I had made some errors. I had never caught the errors, but there they were, obvious as can be, right in front of my mind's eye. And there were hundreds of things like that. I was able to focus on them all, without distraction. I guess the best way to describe the experience would be that my whole life I've been turning in my work for grades, and I just got them all back with the professor's notes in the margins."

"Did he give you an 'A'?" asked Claire, her eyes twinkling.

"Very funny," said Penfield. "Seriously…looking at all of it, with the errors I've made, I'd probably give myself a 'B-.'"

"Not the kind of grade you'd expect a Nobel Prize winner to receive," Reynolds commented. "How do you know that His corrections to your

work are accurate?"

"That's just it. It didn't feel as if they were 'his' corrections. It was as though I'd gotten smarter, you know, moved up to the next tier, and was looking back at my old work. The errors were easy to spot."

"I remember when I was moving out of an apartment at the same time I was going for my doctorate, I found all of my freshman and sophomore papers in anthropology. Reading them, I couldn't believe how much I'd progressed," said Reese.

"Yeah, kinda like that. The concepts and equations that I had struggled with just a few years ago, graphically represented, looked so much simpler."

"Wasn't that how Einstein supposedly did his physics – graphically?" asked Claire.

"Yes," answered Walt. "He'd go for walks. Wouldn't even carry a pencil and paper. He would visualize his theories. Sometimes he would get so deeply into them that when he came back to reality, he would be lost, miles from home on a strange street, sitting on a curb, with no recollection of how he got there."

"Maybe he was on to something?"

"Claire," Walt answered, "believe me, we've all tried it. It has never worked for anyone else."

"Until today."

"Yes…until today."

Claire continued, "You know, maybe it's like music or a foreign language. You never really master it if you don't start learning it at the age of four or five. If you start then, when your brain is still getting organized, a part of it gets switched on for that purpose. Maybe our friend, little Al Einstein, started visualizing galaxies and cosmic processes at the age of four."

"It could be. That makes sense. Well, if that's the case, I guess I was visualizing GI Joe instead of pulsars because mine never got switched on."

"Until today," Reese reiterated.

"Yeah," Penfield answered, "until today."

The group fell silent for a time, all lost in their own thoughts, all chewing their own pastries. After at least ten minutes, Penfield spoke. “You know what’s bothering me is…why? Why is he doing this? For those of us who grew up believing in God, it’s not consistent with our image…my image, at least…that He would arrive this way…asking for our stamp of approval.”

“Maybe it’s a test?” Reynolds asked.

“I guess it could be. But what’s the test, exactly?”

Reese offered, “You know, He has said that His previous visits were more consistent with the Hollywood epic arrivals, and the results weren’t exactly as He wanted.”

Penfield, curious, asked, “How so?”

“Well, the best comparison I can conceive of, for what He described, is childbirth. If His earlier visits were dramatic and frightening, it might have had a traumatic effect on the Chosen…you know, somewhat ruining the transition for them. The conclusion of the obstetricians is similar. Instead of the bright light, rough handling, loud voices, and noises in the delivery room, they dim the lights, speak softly, and deliver the new baby into a tub of warm water.”

“I guess that makes sense,” said Penfield.

“I think it’s for the benefit of the ones who stay,” said Reynolds.

“What do you mean?” asked Claire.

“Well, if all hell broke loose upon His arrivals in the past, those staying would be the most traumatized. With all sorts of biblical cataclysms going on, it would be harder to deny the fact that God had been here and judged you and you had failed.”

“That’s true,” Reese commented. “Denial is not only an extremely common trait among humans, it is a very necessary one. If, instead of being in denial about our shortcomings, we obsess on them, it can lead to becoming totally dysfunctional.”

“Doesn’t denial prevent us from correcting our flaws?” Penfield asked.

“For those who exercise it to the max, yes, that’s true. For most, denial allows us to pack away all of our flaws, bringing them out one by one to deal with as we can handle them.”

McWilliams joined in, “It kinda makes sense. The way people are, they’ll just tell themselves that it wasn’t really God, it wasn’t really Judgment Day, and they’ll go on with their lives.”

“Even after however many millions, or maybe just thousands, leave with Elohim?” asked Claire.

“Yes,” McWilliams replied. “They’ll convince themselves that space aliens took them…not God. People have an amazing ability to rationalize to protect their own egos.”

“So anyway, Nicholas,” Reese continued, “you might be right. Perhaps this is His way to minimize the impact of His visit…to try to ensure that the least amount of damage occurs to the ones left behind.”

Reynolds asked, “Has anyone else noticed that we’re all referring to those who aren’t going as ‘them’ and not ‘us’?”

Silence filled the room as Reynolds’ words sunk in. After a few moments, Reese replied, “Again…that’s human nature. Whenever we look at illness statistics, accident statistics, anything like that, we always assume ‘not us.’ This is basically the same.”

“Basically the same except that with diseases the ratios are like one in ten thousand that you will get sick. From what I’ve heard Elohim say to you, He’s planning on taking very few. It might be one in ten thousand, or one in a million.”

Craig added, “It still holds true, Nicholas. If someone is going under the knife for heart or brain surgery, and is told it only has a one-in-a-hundred survival rate, most often the patient will believe that he or she is that one. It’s hard-wired. We have to feel that way. Marine Recon guys going on a suicide mission believe they will survive.”

Sighing, Claire said, “My husband has been talking to Elohim constantly for days and won’t ask Him.”

Reese looked sheepish. Craig came to his rescue. “Again, that’s normal. As long as he doesn’t ask, he can believe whatever he wants.”

“Well, I didn’t marry a ‘normal’ guy!”

Everyone laughed, except Reese. Softly, he responded, “If I…we are going, we’ll have an eternity to enjoy it. If we’re not, I would prefer not to know until the last moment.”

"You, Claire, Matthew, and Melissa will be joining me in Heaven."

Everyone whirled to see Elohim standing at the open door to the break room. Reynolds was the first to speak. "I really wish You would stop doing that!"

Smiling, Elohim entered the room and said, "May I join you?"

McWilliams answered, "Of course, please."

He pulled out a chair for Elohim. Reese and Claire were both distracted, staring into each other's eyes.

"Okay," said Reynolds, "That takes care of them. How about the rest of us? That is, if anyone else here cares…I know I do."

Nicholas looked around the table at the others. McWilliams' eyes were downcast, as if he were trying to read the fine print on the sweetener packets. Penfield, although claiming to be not yet convinced of Elohim's authenticity, looked apprehensive.

Craig spoke without looking up. "I'd like to know."

Penfield added, trying to act nonchalant, "Sure. Me, too."

Elohim lifted a cheese Danish from the platter and took a bite, chewing it slowly. After swallowing, he cleared his throat slightly and said, "Each of you will join me."

An instant smile filled Craig McWilliams' face, his eyes rising to look at Elohim. Then, just as suddenly, his smile disappeared. Before he could speak, Elohim answered the unasked question. "Craig, your wife will be coming, as well."

Reynolds, upon hearing the news, had crossed his arms over his chest and now looked as if he were hugging himself.

Turning to Penfield, Elohim said, "You look concerned."

"Well," he replied, "From what I understand, the percentage that you are taking is a small one. What are the chances that all of us in this room would go, including Craig's wife?"

"Craig's wife and yours, as well."

"That's wonderful…but even more of an anomaly."

"Walt, the chances are obviously one hundred percent. There are times when you need to think less like a mathematician and think more like a

psychologist," said Reese, who had recovered somewhat. "Elohim expected this question from everyone who was brought in to interview Him. How smooth would this process proceed if the people who were supposed to validate Him had been told they weren't going to Heaven?"

"So we're all just being told this? It's not true?"

Although Penfield directed the question at Elohim, Reese answered, "Elohim has promised to be truthful in His answers. Therefore, either everything that He says is true…."

"Or that statement was not," finished Elohim. "Quite a paradox. Like so many other dilemmas in your lives, only the outcome will determine the truth."

Penfield, still not satisfied, asked, "I know I'm not supposed to think like a mathematician for a moment, but you have to admit it seems a little odd, doesn't it?"

Elohim replied, "Only if you assume that I had no input into who joined this group. There are others within each of your fields who could be sitting here today, instead of you. Reese is correct. How fruitful would this interview process be if some of the interviewers had been told they were not to join me?"

Reese looked at Penfield. "Walter, there is a press conference today at two o'clock. I need to have my answer ready. If you feel that you can become comfortable by then, I would appreciate your participation."

Penfield said thoughtfully, "I obviously need some more time. I…."

Elohim interrupted, "If you would prefer to discuss me in private, I can leave."

Penfield said, "From what I've seen and heard, we wouldn't have any more privacy if you did. No, it's okay. I just…I'm still struggling with what I need as a proof. As I was saying before you arrived, and as you know, you could provide me with the answer to every great mystery of physics and that might make you superior to Einstein, but would it prove you are God?"

Elohim sat quietly, letting him speak.

"A miracle?" offered Craig.

"I took a vacation several years ago in Las Vegas. David Copperfield was performing at one of the casinos, and my wife wanted to see him…so

we went. I expected to be able to figure out his tricks and wasn't all that excited about the prospect of seeing his show. He blew me away. For the most part, I was as dumbstruck as the rest of the audience. In the weeks and months that followed, I made it kind of a hobby to figure out each of the tricks. I made a list of them, and as I solved each one, I checked it off the list. It took me two years to finish the list." Looking at his watch, he said, "I have less than six hours, not two years.

"Elohim, you've already performed miracles. I can't explain how you fixed Craig's spine. I can't explain how you produced Reese's lost book or solved several of the open cases at the FBI. Hell, I can't even explain why touching you affects everyone so profoundly and differently. But I know this: if I could go back in time three thousand years and meet with the people of that time, I could do things for them they couldn't explain."

"Walt, maybe I can help you explain this," Reese said. "It's right up my alley, so to speak. For the masses, throughout history, all that could not be explained or replicated was attributed to the gods, from rainfall to getting sick. Back then, God had an extremely full plate. He was doing just about everything. As the sciences progressed and more became explainable, each of those tasks was removed from God's purview so that now we're down to the last, I don't know, five percent…fifteen percent of the things that are still unexplainable. It has been the orientation of the scientists to resist automatically chalking off the unexplained as just God messing around again. If that hadn't been their orientation for the last thousand years, we wouldn't have figured out all the things that we have. We'd still be praying for our children to get well instead of giving them antibiotics. That's all that Walt is doing today…resisting the urge to assume it's God's work. You can't help it; it's almost hard-wired, right?"

"That's relatively accurate."

Reese continued, "The dichotomy between the non-scientist and the scientist is that the non-scientist is quicker than is warranted to take things on faith, and the scientist cannot take anything on faith."

"Wait a second!" Penfield protested.

Reese, wanting to finish his thought, said, "Walt…the problem is that… and I'm speaking as a psychologist here…the only way any human can

consistently disregard one recurring explanation is by denying its existence. The presence of horseshit on your dining room table is only a mystery if you believe that the Appaloosa living in your home doesn't exist. The benefit of denying the existence of God is that it allowed a tremendous, beneficial progress to occur which might not have occurred. The flaw with it is…how can you prove the existence of something that you've already decided cannot exist? Notice I said *cannot* rather than *does not* exist, because that's what happened. Science…and I'm not attacking you, Walt… science has reached a point where it cannot allow the possibility of God's existence. That's a long way from science's origin, which was to understand His work. If you think about it for a moment, isn't it inconsistent with the pure scientific method to presumptively disqualify any possible explanation?"

"Yes. And you're right. The past tendency to lump everything that couldn't be explained under 'God' is something that my field has worked hard to expunge."

"But there's a problem with the concept, Walt. It's almost as though science created two bushels, one labeled 'God' and one 'Nature.' One by one, the mysteries have been taken out of the 'God' bushel, studied, analyzed, and explained…then put into the bushel marked 'Nature,' as if it made a difference."

"What do you mean?"

"The scientists decided that nature and God are not the same thing. Nature is not only God's creation, it's His toolbox. It's what He uses to express His wishes. Scientists have come a long way in explaining the processes of nature, but that doesn't disprove the existence of God any more than being able to explain how a car works disproves the existence of General Motors."

"Reese, you make some good points. But it doesn't get me any closer to figuring out the proof I need."

"Walt, you're not listening. My point is that the proof you're seeking does not exist within the current framework of the discipline, because the discipline in its present form was created for the sole purpose of disproving

the existence of God in the first place. Logically, no proof within that framework is possible."

"Sole purpose! Come on, Reese!"

"Think about it logically, Walt. At some point in the past, it was assumed that everything was done by God. As time went by, one of the proto-scientists decided this wasn't right, so he started studying and doing experiments until he could replicate and manipulate some of the phenomena that were attributed to God. With every new proof came a diminishment of the definition of 'God.' After some bumps in the road…."

"Bumps in the road…like being executed for committing heresy?"

"Yeah, after that stuff…anyway, scientists became empowered and continued trudging on through today. But the basic premise, under which today's entire structure was designed, was to disprove God's existence. Therefore, you won't find a 'proof' within that structure because you can't."

"I'm still not buying this," Penfield replied. "You mentioned a minute ago that science was founded on understanding God's work, not disproving His existence."

"That was a position of necessity. The choice at the time was to claim a belief in God and a desire to understand His ways, or death."

Elohim, who had been patiently listening to all of this, added, "Actually, very few were put to death. It is an historical fact that has been greatly exaggerated. And those who were had committed other offenses. The normal reaction, at the time, to scientists whose conclusions offended the faithful was a loss of patronage."

"The same technique as today, just the opposite side of the ideological fence," said Reese. "If any scientist supports the existence of God in any way, he loses his funding, as well as any tenure-track position at a university."

"It's not the best way to win a popularity contest, that's for sure," agreed Penfield.

"The point I'm trying to make, Walt, is that the rest of us are trying to satisfy ourselves that Elohim is God while you're still trying to figure out if there is a God. And since we live in a physical universe, and God does what

He does by guiding the physical processes, how can you prove that it is His hand at the wheel?"

"Or that there even is a hand at the wheel," added Craig.

"Right," agreed Reese. "The argument is not whether there really is a car going down the road; everybody agrees on that. The argument is whether anyone is driving."

"That," said Penfield, "is the best distillation of the positions I've ever heard."

"To stick with the driving analogy for a minute…those who believe in God say, 'Look, the car left the Upper East Side of Manhattan, drove cross-country, and ended up in a parking lot in Santa Monica…somebody had to drive it.' Scientists say, 'Put enough cars in motion in Manhattan, and all of them have to end up somewhere. Given enough time and enough cars leaving Manhattan, one of them will eventually end up at that parking lot in Santa Monica.' Walt, do you really believe that?"

"Look," said Penfield defensively, "I do believe in God. Personally…privately…I believe in God. I always have, and all of the work that I've done in my field has done nothing to sway me from that belief. But you're right…the nature of my field or, I guess, science in general is that we have to leave that belief at home. If you want me to stand up next to you and take the position, explicitly or implicitly, that there is a God, I can do that as a man…I can't do that as a scientist. Before I could even address the issue as a scientist, I would have to define what God is, which, in case you haven't noticed in your studies, Reese, is a question that has been stumping many minds for thousands of years. I doubt that I'm going to solve that one in a few hours. So, as I said, as a man, yes, I can take the position that there is a God and probably, between now and then, satisfy myself that Elohim is or is not God. If that's good enough, I'll be standing there next to you."

Chapter Seventeen

Reese, Walt, and Elohim were settled back in the conference room. Penfield looked at his watch and said, “It’s about nine o’clock. We have a lot to cover in five hours. Elohim, you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that you have added levels of complexity in front of scientists to keep us engaged. Could you explain that?”

“Yes, it probably does need some clarification. As I also said earlier, man and I are very much alike, in ways that would surprise you. There is, within man, the ability to create, just as there is within me. This ability is weak, extremely feeble. It becomes stronger as it joins with others, but on its own can affect nearly nothing. Fortunately, nearly nothing is what physicists now deal with on a daily basis.”

“That’s funny,” said Penfield sarcastically.

“I am not trying to be funny, but literal. The smallest particles that are studied have so little mass and so little energy that they are nearly nothing. And because they are nearly nothing, they can be more easily influenced.”

“By what?” Penfield asked.

“By your mind.”

“This is starting to sound a little New Age for me.”

“I understand that, but please remember that some of the New Age beliefs are based upon a rediscovery of ancient teachings, myths, and lore. Those ancient beliefs came from those who were present during my last visit. They were based on questions asked and answered then. Those who were not chosen attempted to pass on the learned knowledge. Imagine how what you learn from me today will sound thousands of years from now.”

“Okay, for the sake of discussion, I’ll buy into this for a moment. Is this a skill that we learn?”

“Actually, it’s one of the skills that you unlearn. When you are born, your mind has the ability to do many things. Those abilities must be developed, but they are there, ready to be tapped. If they are not developed…if they are disregarded as if they do not exist, the parts of the mind that can perform them are dedicated to other, more temporal skills.”

“As Claire mentioned earlier, talking about musical ability or a foreign language?” asked Reese.

“Yes.”

Penfield continued to question Elohim. “What do you mean by ‘ability’?”

“Walt, compare it to language. Behavioral scientists have already proved that the language input a baby receives is insufficient to teach the child to talk, listen, write, and read. In the process of mastery of language, the mind makes tremendous leaps beyond that to which it is exposed. The ability to manipulate your environment is the same. The ability is there, in your mind, ready to be encouraged and developed. But, as in a child who never picks up a musical instrument, the ability never develops to a point of physical manifestation. The ability never completely goes away; it just remains feeble and amateurish. You live in a feedback system. Learning to speak is instantly rewarded, not just with praise but with understanding of what is being spoken around you, and being understood by others. If your mind attempts to pursue something for which there is no external feedback, that direction dies off.”

“I’m not sure I understand. If an infant attempts to manipulate its environment yet hasn’t developed the skills, what feedback would it get?”

“Walt, not all feedback is a loop. The first sounds a baby makes are not words. It is not the loving encouragement of the parents that makes the baby want to keep trying. It is witnessing speech happening all around, and wanting to join in, that motivates. The first time a four-year-old sits down at the piano, nothing happens that anyone with a musical ear could call positive feedback; yet, the child persists because of seeing the piano teacher play, hearing other music played, and being told he or she can also play someday by following certain steps. The child makes a leap of faith, continues the effort, and eventually begins to play recognizable melodies.

“Not only does this not happen with some of the other abilities of the brain, but in many cases negative feedback is received. Reese, you are an intelligent and open-minded person. If Melissa, at the age of three, had come to you and told you that she could reach into her crayon box with her

eyes closed and always pull out whatever color she wanted, what would you say to her?"

Reese felt that familiar tingle again, the tingle that happened whenever Elohim described something that had actually occurred in his past. "I didn't discourage her."

"Yes, you did. You said, 'That's nice.' Children learn very young that 'That's nice' means 'I know that didn't really happen, but I love you, so I'll say something gentle that doesn't hurt you but also doesn't encourage you.' Melissa is now a talented young artist. If, when she brought her first crayon drawings to you, your reaction to her artwork was 'That's nice,' do you think she would have continued drawing?"

Smiling, Reese said, "I remember how we reacted to her first drawings. We raved about them and hung them on the walls. When she was five, we arranged an 'opening' where she hung all of her work, and we had friends and relatives over to look at them."

Elohim said, "As I recall, they were all sold that day."

"Yes, we arranged for everyone who attended to buy one each for one, two, or three dollars. She got the money, and we kept the drawings. We still have them."

"So," Elohim continued, "she demonstrated one budding skill and got raves, a showing, and money; however, she demonstrated another and received a 'That's nice' from her parents."

"We didn't know…."

"I know that, Reese. This isn't a condemnation. I'm simply making a point. To make it further…when Matthew was almost five, you noticed that his bedroom light was still on after bedtime. When you called down the hallway for him to turn it off, he replied…."

"I remember that, too. He said he could turn it off with his mind, but it took some time and we needed to wait a few minutes. My reaction was to march into his room and order him to get out of bed and turn it off immediately."

"That wasn't all you said."

Reliving the moment in his mind, Reese said, "Oh, crap. I also told him to quit lying."

“Not exactly positive feedback.”

“No.”

“Reese, don’t feel bad. You reacted within what have become the normal parameters of society. Literally thousands of times a day children tell their parents that they can see imaginary friends, that they can make a pencil spin on the table without touching it, as well as countless other examples of an incipient skill manifesting itself. Instead of the parents reacting as they do at the children’s first steps, first words, or first drawing, they react as you did. And if the children don’t get the message, the parents eventually sit them down and say that if they don’t stop this behavior, they’ll be taken to a doctor to be checked. If Mozart’s first interest in the piano was greeted with chastisement and punishment, Earth would not have his great works.”

Penfield said, “If children were chastised and punished for their first steps, it might retard the development of the skill, but they would still eventually walk.”

“They would. But only because their world was filled with others who walked. It would be an undeniable skill. The skills that I am discussing are, in their incipient stage, deniable by others. They are also notoriously difficult to prove, especially for a four-year-old. How could Reese’s son, Matthew, prove after the fact that he could turn off his room light with his mind?”

Penfield, not ready to give up the point, asked, “Why couldn’t he replicate it in front of Reese or Claire?”

“Basically, for the same reason that many people can sing quite well in the shower, but if they get in front of an audience, they sing horribly.”

“Stage fright.”

“In a sense. The tension of performing the feat for a skeptic is intimidating. Walt, do you have any problem with public speaking?”

“Mostly, no.”

“The event that causes you to add ‘mostly’ to your answer was a speech that you agreed to give on binary pulsars.”

“Yes. Boy, that is spooky when you do that. Anyway, the existence of binary pulsars was considered to be impossible. When I presented my

findings at CERN, the entire audience thought I'd lost my mind. They verged on the hostile. It's an understatement to say that my presentation didn't go well…about one minute into it, my mind just went blank."

"The same process would have happened in Matthew's mind. The ability to influence the environment is a subtle one, and at the beginning stages of the skill, the person doing it isn't even sure what he did to make it happen. In a situation where he would have been asked to prove it to his disbelieving parents, his mind would have also gone blank, and he would have failed.

"So, to continue…not only does the absence of positive feedback cause the skills to wither, it also causes the child, as he or she grows, to stop trying. There are two relatively famous examples of this. The first is a circus elephant that as a small juvenile is tethered by tying a rope to a four-foot stake, pounded into the ground. The small elephant pulls repeatedly at the stake and cannot budge it. When the elephant is fully grown and easily capable of pulling out the stake, the circus continues to use the same rope and stake. It restrains the elephant because the elephant learned early on that he could not pull it out, so he never tries again. The second example involves beta fighting fish. They are beautiful fish, a lovely addition to an aquarium. Unfortunately, they are quite territorial when it comes to other betas. If you add a second to your tank, they will instantly fight to the death. However, if you put them in a tank with a piece of clear glass separating the two halves, they will repeatedly crash themselves into the invisible barrier until they learn that they cannot get through to the other side. They eventually give up. If the glass is surreptitiously removed, they will still not cross to the other side of the tank for the rest of their lives, because they have learned that it cannot be done.

"The same thing happens with people. Not only is infancy and early childhood an excellent time to learn and develop skills, it is also an excellent time to learn what cannot be done. Once assimilated, it is nearly impossible to unlearn that lesson.

"This has all been a very roundabout way of answering your original question, Walt. But the point is, all of you have learned that you cannot manipulate your environment with your minds. You cannot levitate this

table. You cannot will this room to be one foot larger. You cannot freeze the water in this carafe by visualizing it. You cannot pull that four-foot-long stake out of the ground, and you cannot cross over to the other side of the tank because of that invisible barrier. When, in fact" – Elohim paused, and a broad smile spread across his face – "you can do much more than you imagine.

"As you and your colleagues have probed farther into the mysterious world of quantum physics, you have all convinced yourselves that all bets are off. There are no preconceived notions of what is and isn't possible. The four-foot stake has been removed…the pane of glass is gone. Have you noticed how nearly every new theory about subatomic particles is proved true?"

Penfield thought for a moment, before answering, "As a matter of fact, that particular field has had a pretty good run of luck."

"Walt, I hate to burst your bubble, but the reason that happens is a result of the experimenter's influence. First, comes the theory. Second, comes the method of proof. The physicist decides what particle must exist and what its properties must be. He or she then decides what subtle method of detection will yield the result that proves the theory. The process of conceptualizing the particle itself causes it to come into existence. The process of conceptualizing the experiment to find the properties of that particle bestows those properties. It is the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy, and it is made easier by the tiny scale. Not only does science have no preconceived notions that preclude the existence of the particle, but the subatomic particle also is substantially easier for the untrained and undeveloped mind to create than, say, to create this chair with your mind."

"They obviously don't all succeed."

"Of course not. And the main reason for that is disagreement. If you are working alone in a laboratory…and by alone I *include* all of the assistants, students, and postdoctoral people who follow you around and hang on your every word…there is no opposing thought."

Walt smiled at this.

"If you conceive of a new subatomic particle, it will spring into existence. If you and your team all conceive of and believe in the particle,

that will aid the process. If you are working with a colleague who vehemently disagrees with the existence of the particle, you will probably not find it. Occasionally, it will happen that you will prove it exists; then, at a later time, he will prove it does not. Your work and his work will both be sound. When you looked, it was there. When he looked, it wasn't."

"So, it's all like Tinker Bell!" Reese commented.

Penfield and Elohim both laughed. After a moment, Elohim said, "In a very real sense, that is exactly how it all works."

Shaking his head, Penfield said, "This takes the 'uncertainty principle' to a new level."

"It reminds me," Reese added, "of the old story of the Emperor dreaming he was a butterfly and trying to figure out a way to prove that he was an Emperor dreaming he was a butterfly, not a butterfly dreaming he was an Emperor dreaming he was a butterfly."

"So, the reason that we've been unsuccessful marrying quantum physics to the standard model is that quantum physics changes with every goofball idea that we can conceive?"

"Yes," Elohim responded, "and the reason the macro world is much harder to affect is that many people participate in the construct, reinforcing its existence. How many hundreds, possibly even thousands of people have been involved in the creation, transport, and use of this table? It is real to all of them. It is a part of their belief systems. If you decided to make it disappear or change its properties, the power of your mind would need to be stronger than the cumulative strength of all of theirs."

"Kind of a mental inertia?" Penfield suggested.

"Yes. It actually is physics on a level that you haven't yet reached. The force of their cumulative belief is a quantifiable value, and the force needed to change it is also quantifiable. There is a monumental web of interlocking and overlapping beliefs that reinforce the current construct. And that system does not even require that a single person has ever seen an object. First of all, to a much lesser degree, animals contribute to the structure, as do insects albeit at a nearly insignificant magnitude. Secondly, contact is not needed for the human being to apply beliefs. If you have assimilated the properties of trees based upon years of study, your mind will extend that

belief to trees that you haven't yet seen. That belief reinforces the structure of trees yet unseen by you."

"How far does this extend?" asked Reese. "I mean, if everyone on Earth decided that the moon didn't exist, would it disappear?"

"It extends to Heaven. The beliefs of those who reside with me are part of the construct. Because of their age, as well as a level of purity of thought they can achieve, their beliefs are stronger than the cumulative value of every living person on Earth." Elohim paused, then added, "And there is also the energy value of my mind."

"Which, I suppose," Penfield remarked, "is quite formidable."

"I suppose that it is."

"Again," said Penfield, "this is all very fascinating in the hypothetical. Is there any way we can see this at work?"

Elohim, smiling, responded, "Walter, I thought you weren't interested in any magic tricks."

"I'm not…I guess I am. It's just that I don't get the feeling we're going to get anywhere just talking."

"Very well."

Elohim had been talking to Walt, while resting both of his hands on the solid oak table. Speaking very softly, he said, "Are you watching?" As he spoke, his hands sunk into the tabletop, as they would into water. Penfield stared in disbelief as both of Elohim's hands, as well as a portion of his wrists, disappeared into the wood. Like a baker reaching into a deep bowl of dough, Elohim raised his elbows slightly and dipped his forearms into the conference table. Pausing to glance at Penfield, he then moved them toward his own body until they emerged from the edge of the table.

Walter Penfield was speechless, still staring at the tabletop where Elohim's hands had penetrated. Reese broke the silence. "How did You do that?"

"When you touch this table, it feels hard. Yet, that is an illusion. The atoms that make up the table and both my hands are almost completely empty space, well over ninety-nine percent. When you touch the table, it feels hard because of an energy field, like two repelling magnets. What causes any material to exhibit its properties, including hardness or

impermeability, is electromagnetic energy, the same energy that not only manifests your physical properties but also is harnessed by your mind. It is, among other things, the flow and exchange of electromagnetism that manifests consciousness. Energy can never be eliminated. However, it can be redirected, manipulated, and converted. You do it all the time. It's how all of your internal electronics work. When I change the energy of the atoms that make up my hands and arms to be in phase with the atoms that make up the table, the individual particles which comprise my arms pass through the vast empty spaces between the particles of the table."

Reese asked Penfield, "Make sense?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. There is so much space between the individual pieces of an atom that if you eliminated all of the space and compressed it to a solid, the entire Earth would be smaller than the sharp tip of a pin. What makes up matter is an interlocking matrix of positive and negative charges, stable and unstable relationships between not only atoms but the electrons that orbit the nucleus of each atom. The more stable and balanced the forces, the more stable and solid the material."

"Like lead?"

"Yeah. A lump of lead is made up of a stable matrix of lead atoms."

"So, 'solidness' is really like a force field?" asked Reese.

"Basically, yes."

"Force fields can be turned on and off, right?"

"It was inconceivable to me, prior to this moment, but, yes, it is theoretically possible."

"I don't think it's just theoretical anymore."

Turning to Elohim, Penfield asked, "You mentioned putting your energy 'in phase' with the table?"

"Yes. I am not turning the energy on and off. It's possible to do so, but quite unnecessary. Simply synchronizing the phase is sufficient. Would you like to see it yourself?"

"I just did."

"No, that's not what I meant." With that, Elohim glanced down at Penfield's elbow, which was resting on the table, his forearm and hand

upright. Penfield also looked down to see his elbow beginning to sink into the wood. Startled, he jerked it up, lifting it above the tabletop.

"I didn't feel anything!"

"There aren't any nerve endings down to that scale. Of course you wouldn't."

Penfield, feeling foolish suspending his elbow above the table, started to lower it, then paused, looking at Elohim who nodded. He gingerly brought it to rest upon the once-again-solid surface.

"So, you can do that remotely?"

"I didn't do it."

"You didn't?"

"No, you did."

"How did I do it?"

"As I explained before, the mind has many skills that are untapped and undeveloped. I stimulated your mind's ability, and you did the rest."

"Okay, assuming for a minute that I suddenly had the skill, I didn't *want* to make my arm go through the table."

"Actually, you did. When I glanced at your elbow after making my comment, you began to look at your elbow instantly. During that moment, what did you think?"

Shaking his head, Penfield said, "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be weird if my elbow went through the wood.' That's all it takes? It seems a little dangerous."

Laughing, Elohim said, "It would definitely dissuade you from errant thoughts. But, yes, it is that simple."

"And now the skill is gone?" Penfield asked with a bit of relief in his voice.

"Actually, no. Once switched on, it will diminish with disuse, like any other function. Barring that, you now have a new skill."

"I'm not sure I'm all that crazy about this. I feel like a new member of the X-Men."

"Walter, you didn't want a magic trick, but you did want something convincing. This is something that you can leave this room with and study

to your heart's content, while being assured that I didn't pull off some sleight-of-hand trick. All I ask is that you heighten your level of mental discipline. The correct chain of thoughts, while in a multistory building such as this, could cause you to slip through all of the floors. In fact, you wouldn't stop at the ground."

Penfield shuddered at the image in his mind. Reese and Elohim could tell by his face that having the image concerned him. Elohim reassured him, "Just visualizing it in the abstract won't make it happen."

"What does?"

Quickly, Elohim snatched up a sugar cube from the service tray and tossed it to Penfield. Walt immediately caught it. "Did you consciously think about catching that sugar cube? Did your conscious mind go through all of the elaborate physical steps needed to perform that simple act?"

"No."

"It's hard to describe, but that is how your newfound skill works. It will become automatic. If you are standing on the edge of a tall building's roof, do you not visualize falling?"

"Yes. I think everyone does."

"But your muscles don't react to that visualization. Just thinking it doesn't cause you to step off and fall."

"I think I understand."

"Excellent."

"Could we talk a little more about the relationship between matter and energy?"

"Certainly. What would you like to know?"

"At this point, I'm not sure I even know the right question. You've turned everything upside down. I feel less like a physicist and more like *Alice Through the Looking Glass*."

"There are so many avenues you and your peers have traveled that are correct. Unfortunately, there are many blind alleys that are currently being touted as the ideal direction for scientific pursuit. Much of reality is simpler than is thought to be the case. Matter is simply energy that is not traveling at the speed of light."

"What? Wait a minute! Explain that."

“All matter is energy; all energy is matter. It is all the same substance. What determines its properties are two things, its speed and your mind. Visualize energy as being the stem cells of the physical world. In the form of pure energy, it has the ability to become any matter that is needed. It is all around you. Every corner of the universe is filled with this resource, the raw material needed to create anything. All it takes is the Word.”

“The Word?” Reese asked.

“Yes…the Word, the concept, the command. I spoke to you both about additional layers of complexity being created in front of scientists. I also explained a few minutes ago that it was the mind of the scientist which created the new particle, not me. What I neglected to stress was that the layers were created by the scientists…not by me.”

Startled, Walt said, “All of it?”

“Yes,” Elohim answered. “If you will recall, at the microscopic level, the scope of creation is so slight that the mind of an individual scientist is sufficiently strong to bring a new level of particle into existence. He or she first develops a theory that a subatomic particle should exist, then sets out to prove its existence…and succeeds.

“And if you will also recall, a second mind can nullify the creation caused by the original scientist. As long as there is a consensus, the act of creation can grow exponentially from a single invisible particle, to manifest as a tangible segment of the fabric of your reality.”

Reese was stunned by the revelation. “So Creation isn’t exclusive to You.”

Elohim smiled. “As so much else we have discussed, this is not that simple. Each of you is instilled with a part of me. Without that part, the act of creation cannot occur.”

With that Elohim paused and reached his hands out to the center of the table between himself and Penfield and Reese. With his arms fully outstretched, he cupped his hands and held them about eight inches apart. “Before I begin,” he said, “I would like to make a request. Reese, as you may recall, the book and table that I materialized appeared when you were not looking in that direction. The small table then disappeared also while you were not looking.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“There is a reason for this. As I explained, your minds already influence reality.

“An object spontaneously appearing is a phenomenon you will consciously reject. This rejection can be so strong that you will not see the object, even though it is there. It is this mechanism which explains the failure of scientists to authenticate the incipient ability in people.”

“Their own disbelief neutralizes the effect of the person studied?”

“Yes. Remember, the subject of the experiment is exerting energy from his mind to affect the environment. The scientist, by his own inherent disbelief, is doing the same thing. For the rare individuals who have begun to develop the skill within themselves, it is akin to trying to light a candle as an observer persistently blows it out. I am about to create an object right before your eyes. I am asking for a willing suspension of disbelief.”

Penfield asked, “So, if our minds oppose the appearance of it, do we prevent it?”

“My ability is more than sufficient to bring it into existence, even if there were a thousand disbelievers observing. That is not the concern. The concern is only that you will not witness it if you reject it firmly enough.”

Reese said, “Okay by me,” and stared intently at the space cupped between Elohim’s hands. Elohim looked at Penfield, who just nodded.

“First I will begin with basic carbon, the most fundamental of the building blocks of life.” The space between his hands was empty; then suddenly, floating in air, was what appeared to be a lump of coal. “There is contained within the area between my hands enough energy to create this carbon. In fact, there is sufficient energy in that space to create millions of tons of carbon, if I wished. The energy descends from its natural state. As it slows to a speed below the speed of light, it becomes matter. Which matter it becomes is a function of my wishes for it. It can be carbon, or it can be a compound such as steel.” The lump instantly changed to a cube of polished steel. “It can be a liquid, such as water….” The cube transformed to a swirling sphere of water, still suspended between his hands. “Or a gas, like neon…,” he continued, and the water changed to a slightly milky gas, maintaining the spherical shape. “Your alchemists of the past believed they

could create gold and tried for entire lifetimes to do so, never knowing that they could do it with their minds." The gas changed to a perfect ball of shining gold. Slowly, Elohim reached his hands together until he grasped the golden ball. Gently, he set it on the table and rolled it to Reese.

Catching it, Reese was surprised at the weight. After turning it over in his hands several times, he handed it to Penfield who, again, seemed at a loss for words. Penfield took the precious mineral and stared at it. After some time he finally spoke. "So, everything is an illusion?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I've grown up believing that water is water and gold is gold…that everything is what it is. We can manipulate it. We can combine various elements…we can exert various forces to change it from one thing to another but only within the properties of the material. We can't…couldn't put a cotton ball in a room and turn it into an elephant."

"Walter, you have spent most of your life trying to figure out how everything works. Now that some of the answers are in front of you, you're sad because the knowledge seems to make it unreal. I ask you, how does understanding the process make it something other than reality?"

"I don't know," Penfield answered, still staring at the ball of gold as if it were going to disappear suddenly. "It just seems so arbitrary…so capricious."

"You don't think that an asteroid smashing into the Earth and destroying every living thing is arbitrary and capricious? Or the accidental mutation of a virus that wipes out mankind? Or a nearby star going supernova, bombarding the Earth with cosmic radiation that kills everything? Walter, reality is as you decide. You on Earth, those in Heaven, and I myself – we create it, control it, maintain it, and guide it so that it is predictable. What is the real difference for you if your mind can create a ball of gold or you can extract it from the Earth?"

"Well, specifically gold – if everyone's mind can create it, it becomes valueless."

"Its value becomes intrinsic, rather than based upon scarcity, real or contrived. Another way of looking at your newfound reality is to consider the points made by Reese when he discusses the hierarchy of needs. If

mankind reaches a level where he can fabricate matter by thought alone, he has reached a new freedom. The skill not only applies to creating pretty baubles; a mere thought can create a bushel of rice or a cheeseburger. Once attained, this skill frees mankind from the pursuit of food, in fact from the pursuit of all that is material. The right people, obtaining such freedom, will devote their lives to the philosophical and humanistic avenues."

"And those who are not the 'right' people?" asked Reese.

"Reese, you already know the answer. It is the point of your lectures. People who are not ready for this freedom will exhibit their lack of readiness in several ways. For some, being able to conjure up a mansion for themselves will not satisfy them if all others can do the same. Possessing a mansion, in and of itself, is not their goal. Having a mansion greater than the others' is. If these people have the skill, they will use it to create a grand personal environment for themselves, but they will also use it to destroy or diminish the environments of others."

"Like a mental graffiti," said Penfield.

"Yes, in a way, but obviously much more powerful. There are also those who actually hate humanity. Reese, as you and I discussed in earlier meetings, this began as a self-hatred and transformed into an outer-directed emotion. Imagine living in an environment where you were hated by another who possessed this skill."

Penfield answered, "Assuming I also had the skill, it would be a constant battle just to maintain the status quo."

"Precisely. And the problem with conflicts of this nature is that they escalate to the point where they develop a life of their own. The original hatred that fueled the first salvo is forgotten. Each attack and counter becomes a justification in itself to move to a higher level of aggression."

"That sounds like the history of war on Earth," said Reese.

"Actually not," answered Elohim. "The earlier warriors in your past instinctively knew something that has been either forgotten or deliberately ignored. It's true that the nature of war is retaliation. This is so true that even when a war is won, an enemy has been created…an enemy who falls back, regroups, and rearms until once again ready to attack. This can only be avoided either by wiping out your enemy completely, as the ancient

warriors did, or by so devastating them that you instill an uncontrollable fear within them, a fear that arises whenever they have even a thought about engaging you in war. This is the case with Japan. The use of the atomic bombs on their cities created a psychological scar on their collective mind. Any thought of retaliation evokes the images of what inevitably would occur as a result of a conflict with the U.S., and the angry thought is repressed. To a lesser degree, the UK and its allies accomplished the same thing with Germany. In both cases, only time will tell whether the strategy worked or simply delayed the eventual retaliation. The devastation wrought upon both countries created festering, deeply buried anger that, if unleashed, will be far worse than before.

"In an environment where all possess the skill, the result is chaos for all. Remember, the ability to produce matter in any form is dependent upon all others within your environment. If you choose to produce a delicious bowl of soup, the mental strength of your neighbor may not be powerful enough to make the soup disappear, but he can materialize a fly to float on top. If several minds join together, they can undo your creations.

"Another manifestation of a lack of readiness would be those who have such a poor self image that they do not believe they are deserving of the good things they can produce. They actually prefer a lifestyle of dependence and unfortunate circumstances. In a world where all people can produce what they need with a mere thought, tolerance for this last group is nil. There is then a dependent group in a world with no charity, not because people are cruel or harsh, but rather because it is unnecessary."

Realization belatedly struck Reese. "Elohim, are You describing Heaven? I mean, are You describing the reason for Your visits…and Your judgments?"

"I am," said Elohim, smiling. "Heaven is such a place…where all possess that skill, as well as others. With such magnificent individual power, you can see the importance of the selection process. The skill to produce is not limited to only good. Those with the skill can produce weapons, viruses, surrogates to perform unspeakable acts. If it can be imagined, it can be produced. Most of your fellow humans cannot handle such power."

“So, life on Earth,” Penfield asked, “is like an application to a country club?”

Laughing, Elohim answered, “Walter, populating Heaven was the reason for Creation. Were it not for that need, Earth, and everyone who lives upon it, would not exist.”

Chapter Eighteen

Clayton Dean sat in the lobby outside the oval office. This was unusual; the President normally did not keep him waiting. The entrance to the waiting room abruptly flew open, and Margo Jackson rushed in, breathless.

"Oh, hi, Clayton. I'm afraid I'm the reason you're waiting." Turning to the President's secretary, Margo started to tell her to let the President know she was there but noticed the woman was already on the phone.

Murmuring something that Margo could not hear, the secretary hung up and turned to the two. "You may go in."

Dean beat her to the door, swinging it open and walking in first, leaving Margo to follow behind. 'So much for chivalry!' she thought to herself as she noticed that the President was alone in his office. There was no pretext of pretending to study papers while his visitors walked in, as so many others in a position of power would indulge. He was already rising from behind his desk, coming around to greet them.

"Clayton, Margo, good to see you both. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

Both acknowledged his greeting and sat in the wingback chairs facing his desk. The President returned to his seat and said, "I really need to hear an update on this situation directly from both of you. Please, fill me in."

Clayton and Margo glanced at each other, unsure who should go first. Dean nodded at Margo, and she began, "Mr. President, it seems to be building up some momentum. As you know, we've moved Elohim to State where Reese Johnson is continuing to meet with him. Dr. Johnson was joined this morning by Walter Penfield, the noted…."

The President interrupted gently, "Margo, I know who Dr. Penfield is. Please go on."

"Sorry. They've been at it since about 5:00 a.m. We're still able to listen and watch video live, but no recording has been successful."

"Does anyone have any theories on why we can't record the meetings?"

"The technicians have torn the equipment apart, added new stuff, done everything they can think of doing. Apparently, we can't record because

Elohim doesn't want to be recorded."

"When the technicians come to that conclusion, that's persuasive. Please go on."

"Penfield went in 'loaded for bear.' He thought it was a bunch of bull… baloney, and figured it would take him about fifteen minutes to prove it. He's been in there for" – she paused and looked at her watch – "about five hours now, and it looks like he's coming around to the consensus opinion."

"The consensus being that Elohim is the real thing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Amazing! Is Penfield willing to make a statement to that effect?"

"He has promised to speak, but only as a lay person – not as a scientist."

"What does that mean?"

"What he said during a break was that he has no idea how to even define God, much less devise a test that would prove His existence. On the other hand, he personally believes in God and is willing to state his opinion about Elohim when the time comes."

The President thought for a moment. As he did, Margo stared at his face closely. 'This has been a tough office for him,' she thought. If the color of his hair and lines on his face were any indication, he had aged triple the number of years he had actually been behind this desk. She could see that he came to some sort of conclusion.

"I think it will be a distinction that'll be lost on most people. Let's stay with him. Anything else, Margo?"

"Yes, sir, there is something else. Walter wanted some proof. So, apparently, Elohim bestowed upon Penfield the ability to pass his body through solid matter. He, Elohim, also materialized a ball of solid gold."

The President stared at Margo as if waiting for the punch line. She smiled nervously and said nothing further. He finally spoke up, "Walter Penfield can pass through walls?"

"Yes, sir. Apparently. Elohim did this as a way to illustrate how matter works at the atomic level."

Glancing over at Dean, he said, "I think I would have preferred parting the sea or something like that."

Dean said nothing.

Shifting gears, the President said, “Margo, what’s our status on the home front? Are things getting out of hand?”

“Well, sir, it’s a little strange. Most illegal activities are way down. We don’t have exact figures yet; however, anecdotally, all of the field offices are reporting that it’s very quiet. We’re getting the same feedback from several of the larger police departments.”

The President smiled. “I think people are just holding their breath and hedging their bets. When we went to church this morning, it was packed. Reverend Bleeker told me after the service that it has been like that at all of the services. And people are congregating at his church, and most others from what he has heard, during off hours. Just wanting to be there.”

Margo nodded acknowledgment and said nothing. The President turned to Dean. “Internationally?”

“Well, Mr. President, it’s a mixed bag. The predominantly Judeo-Christian countries are acting the way we are. Everyone’s in a ‘wait-and-see’ mode. Even Communist China and North Korea are quiet right now, and I’m not quite sure what to make of that. Iran is up to something – not sure what at this point, but the communications are off the scale. Syria, Saudi, some pockets in Iraq and Afghanistan are all active. There’s a lot of money moving around, and plenty of closed-door meetings are being held. If you want more detail, you’ll have to get it from the CIA. The most troubling is the EU. Of course the students are in the streets, yelling about a U.S. plot. But it seems the governments have also climbed on the bandwagon, except for the UK, of course. There’s a consensus forming and it’s not good. They all seem to think we’re up to something big, but they can’t figure out what it is yet, so they’re covering their bases by going on record that this whole Elohim thing is a sham cooked up by you.”

“The secular trend over there has boxed them into an ideological corner.”

“Yes, sir. It has. The fact that we haven’t officially come out on this subject helps, but God knows what’s going to happen after two o’clock today.”

Grinning tightly, the President responded, “I’m sure He does. Are we getting any feedback on the subject of location? Is anyone ticked off because Elohim chose the U.S. to make his appearance?”

“That’s part of the ideological corner they’re in…they can’t really complain that we’re keeping God to ourselves if they can’t publicly admit there is a God. That’s why they’re sticking to this theory that it’s just a scam perpetrated by us.”

“You mean me.”

“Well…yes, sir.”

“It’s all right, Clayton. I’m used to it by now.”

Drumming his fingertips on the brightly polished desk for a moment, the President asked, “Are the two of you in agreement with me on how we’re handling this?”

Margo was the first to speak. “I am. We’ve covered the bases. The Bureau checked him out, as best we could since he doesn’t seem to exist. The linguists were a good move by Bill. And they were certainly blown away. Dr. Johnson has been excellent. He still hasn’t formally committed to a position. He’s just watching and listening, trying to make up his mind. I think that if he comes out in favor of Elohim, there’ll be a little bit of a credibility problem but not too bad. Penfield is going to be strong – not as strong as an endorsement from Randolph Duncan would be, but pretty damn good. I just wish we had video of all of the meetings. I’d love to turn all of it over to the news channels and let them regurgitate it endlessly.”

Clayton Dean looked thoughtful. “I have no problem with what we’ve done thus far. I agree with Margo that we’ve been as thorough and conscientious as possible, considering we’re breaking new ground here. I am curious how we’re going to handle the announcement. Is the government of the United States going to formally take the position that Elohim is God?”

“No,” answered the President. “Margo, you get up and summarize the points that we can state as fact. We let Johnson speak, and Penfield. Then Elohim, I guess. We basically take the position that this man approached us and made the claim that he was our Creator. We checked him out as best as we could and couldn’t find any contradictory evidence.”

Clayton ventured, “That sounds like an endorsement to me.”

“Me, too,” said Jackson.

His voice tightening slightly, the President responded, “Then suggestions, please.”

Dean said, “I think we have to clearly state that we have no position on Elohim’s status or veracity.”

The President asked, “Margo, are you willing to make that statement?”

“No,” she answered quickly. Then, somewhat nervously, she added, “I’ve met the man. I’ve spent some time with him. He feels real to me. I might be wrong, but I don’t feel comfortable getting up in front of the world – and *Him* – and saying that.”

“Fair enough. I understand. After all, if he is who he says, there are bigger issues at stake than your position with the government.”

Concerned, Margo asked, “I hope that’s not in jeopardy, sir?”

“No, Margo, it’s not, and that isn’t what I meant to imply. The point is, if he really is God and this is really Judgment Day, why would you care about your next performance review? Heck, why would I care about the next election?”

“I wouldn’t have a problem making the statement,” said Dean.

Both of them turned to look at the Secretary of State. The President asked, “Clayton, are you sure?”

“Yes, sir. I am. I haven’t met him. I would prefer to keep it that way from now until two o’clock. It’s the right thing to do, and I guess I’m the right man for the job. If he is God, he’ll understand.”

א

William Stavros loved to multitask. The wall of televisions murmured in the background. One of the images or sound bites caught his attention occasionally. He thumbed through his phone slips while playing his voice mails on the speaker phone. Having separated the phone slips into two piles, he placed one pile in the center of his desk and threw the other away. Next, he moved on to his e-mails. Stavros noted that there were several hundred in the queue. When he had the computer search the queue for e-mails from members of the organization, 341 were selected. Sending that

batch to his high-speed printer to create a pile that he would take home to read later, he then perused the rest of the list. Stavros could tell from the subject line that some were a waste of time and deleted them casually. His filters had eliminated much of the spam, yet several made it through successfully. As he opened each e-mail, the familiar graphical appearance of the spams pitching Viagra or stock purchases caused his right finger to tap the delete key immediately. After his first pass through the list, he saw that it was down to twenty-three. Going back to the top, he began reading each one. Some required a response; those received a terse two or three sentence reply. Others needed no answer and were either forwarded or deleted. Twenty minutes after beginning the entire process, he came across Lynn Sheffield's e-mail.

He was excited by Sheffield's passion. Stavros had met many like him in the past. "What was the phrase…?" he wondered out loud to no one. "Yes, men with the 'lean and hungry look,'" he said, quoting Shakespeare. He moved his mouse, and the cursor swung to the reply button. Clicking once, he began his response:

Mr. Sheffield, thank you for your letter. I am always in need of men such as you. Please come to my office tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. Bring this e-mail with you for verification purposes. See you tomorrow. WS

Stavros added his digital signature and clicked send. He was about to move on to his next e-mail, when his intercom buzzed. Punching the button, he said, "Yes."

"Shelby Gentry is here."

"Send her in."

Shelby entered almost immediately, knowing how Stavros felt about waiting for anything. "What is it, Shelby?"

"Well, sir, I just thought you might want to see this."

Bringing a paper around to the side of his desk, she casually glanced at the computer screen, noticing Sheffield's e-mail and Stavros' response which caused her to hesitate.

"Shelby, what's the matter?" he asked, noticing her eyes on his computer monitor.

"I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't being nosy…I just happened to…."

“Damn it, Shelby. What is it?”

“That man, Sheffield. He’s the one I told you about in Tucson, the one who popped up here on the steps of the Hoover Building, the one who is on their face-recognition list.”

“He’s the one on their shit list?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Damn it. I just invited him to meet me. I’d better uninvite him. Give me a second.”

Stavros clicked on Sheffield’s e-mail again and went to the reply screen for a second time. This e-mail was somewhat different:

Sheffield, when I responded before, I didn’t realize that you were on the FBI watch list. I can’t use you, and I don’t want to meet you. WS

Watching the screen, Shelby asked, “Mr. Stavros, don’t you think that’s a little…?” She was stopped by the withering look he gave her. He clicked send and spun back around to look at the paper she had brought in.

“Now, what the hell is this?”

א

Lynn Sheffield was watching the television in his motel room, when he heard the “bing” from his laptop. Rolling to the other side of the bed, he sat up and clicked on the e-mail. When he saw that it was from William Stavros, his heart beat faster with anticipation. He could not believe his good fortune. Stavros wanted to meet with him…tomorrow. As he read, the laptop beeped again, telling him another e-mail had arrived, which he ignored.

“Finally,” he said out loud, “I’m going to get a chance.” Too excited to sit, he paced around the room, acting like a child who had just been told he was going to Disneyland. The constant stream of chatter from the news station on the television was unheard, his mind whirling. Lynn visualized traveling with an expense account all across the United States, fighting for the cause. One day in New York, the next in Yosemite, the next in Houston…he would be taking on the establishment and reclaiming the country for people like himself.

“I need to print the e-mail,” he said, remembering he would need it to get in. Sitting back down at the edge of the bed, he attached the USB wire from the portable HP printer and right-clicked the message that would change his life. As the printer buzzed, he moved the message to his saved file, once again noticing the second e-mail that he had all but forgotten. This time he noticed that it, too, was from Stavros. Opening it hurriedly, his eyes focused on the short second message, the words hitting him like individual sledgehammers.

He sat motionless for several minutes, just staring at the LCD screen. The only visible motion was the clenching and unclenching of his jaw muscles. After a time he stood, gripping the laptop which was still connected to the printer. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he hurled the computer, smashing it against the wall.

Chapter Nineteen

The familiar group, except for Elohim, was again in the break room, this time joined by Margo Jackson. She asked Reese and Walt, “I missed part of your meeting; was it productive?”

Before Reese could reply, Penfield said, “Oh, I don’t know. We did get two questions answered…‘What’s the meaning of life?’ and ‘What is reality?’ Other than that…oh yeah, and I can now penetrate solid objects with my body. I’d say, all in all, a mildly productive meeting.”

In a false, pouting voice, Reese added, “All I got was a gold ball.”

They all laughed.

The staff had left a platter of sandwiches, chips, and an iced bucket of soft drinks and juices for them. Nicholas Reynolds chomped noisily on a chip as Margo asked, “Are the two of you ready?”

Reese answered first. “I am. I really only have one remaining concern… and you all know what that is.”

Penfield said, “I don’t. What’s your concern?”

“I forgot that you hadn’t been in on the previous discussions…I’m satisfied that Elohim is not a mortal.”

“I think that’s pretty obvious!”

“Yeah, it is. Anyway, Walt, you’re approaching it like a scientist. Is he a man or is he God? As someone who has studied most of the religions of the world, I have to look at a few more options. Once we settle the ‘not a mortal’ question, that leaves other possibilities.”

“Uhhh…you mean…you think he’s the devil?”

“No, I don’t. All I’m saying is that once you mentally cross over into this realm, God isn’t the only possible choice.”

“From what I remember of my childhood religious teaching, this would be the type of trick Satan would enjoy,” Penfield said with a slightly worried look on his face.

“It would be,” Reese answered. “And Elohim has passed a couple of ancient tests so far. But it is possible that those tests were planted in the past by Lucifer.”

“This is way out of my field,” said Penfield.

“Actually…mine, too. I know just enough to be dangerous. Elohim did meet with Cardinal Bonavente who seemed convinced that Elohim was the real deal.”

“I heard about the meeting, the prayers, the tears. It didn’t sound like a rigorous test to me.”

“According to Mario, there is only one possible way, and it has to be performed at the Vatican.”

“Performed? Are you talking about an…?”

“An exorcism.”

Penfield sat back in his chair and sighed. “And I thought this would be simple. Anyway…Margo, to answer your question – yes, I think I *am* ready. I mean, what I’m prepared to say is that he isn’t mortal and that he possesses abilities and knowledge beyond what is known by the rest of us.”

“That’ll be good.”

Reese asked, “Do we get some more time with Him?”

“Well, I finally got a returned call from Rabbi Schmidt. He wants to chat with Elohim, briefly, as he put it. He should be here shortly.”

“That should be interesting,” McWilliams said.

א

Rabbi Leo Schmidt arrived at the main entrance of the Department of State building and went straight through security. Margo Jackson had an aide waiting for him in the main hall to whisk him up to the floor where everyone was waiting. Schmidt recognized Reese Johnson immediately, noticing a woman about Johnson’s age who was probably his wife. He also recognized Craig McWilliams whose face had been smeared all over the media for the last two days since the revelation about his recovery. A black woman in her thirties approached immediately and extended her hand. “Rabbi Schmidt, I’m Margo Jackson.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Jackson,” he said, shaking her hand. Her grip was firm and self-assured.

Margo introduced Leo to the rest of the group. When the introductions were finished, everyone sat. They were in a large meeting room with deep, maroon carpet, dark paneling, and a massive conference table. Schmidt was certain the room was well equipped with various audio-visual gear, but none was visible, most likely concealed in slots in the ceiling or behind panels in the walls.

Reese Johnson spoke first. “Rabbi, I am extremely happy that you decided to come.”

“Dr. Johnson….”

“Reese, please.”

“Reese, and please, call me Leo. It remains to be determined if I am happy to be here. I am still not clear as to the purpose for my presence.”

“Perhaps I can clarify that,” Reese answered. “As I am sure you know from the media and whatever Margo has shared with you, over the last few days we have exposed several people to Elohim….”

Schmidt interrupted, “Please, Reese, at least for the moment…if you wouldn’t mind referring to the gentleman as ‘our guest’ or something akin to that, I would appreciate it. The name you mentioned is a very holy name in the Jewish faith. Using it if appropriate is certainly fine; using it if not appropriate is most definitely not fine.”

“I knew that,” Reese replied, appearing slightly chastised, “and I am sorry. Our guest has been interviewed by linguists, representatives of the Catholic Church, a psychologist and profiler, a physicist and, of course, me. All of us have approached Him from our own perspectives. All of us have come to our own conclusions.”

“Are your conclusions unanimous?”

Reese hesitated for a moment. “That’s a tough question to answer. Unanimous in that we agree on who He is…no. Some of the people mentioned, such as the linguists, were not asked to evaluate Him on that basis. Unanimous in that all of the people who have met Him believe that He is not a mortal, yes.”

“That still does not explain why I am needed.”

“Well, sir…your opinion carries a lot of weight with your community.”

"Yes, it does. And it does so because I am a cautious man and a reverent man. Let me explain. I have spent a lifetime studying the 613 laws of the Torah…countless hours arguing with fellow rabbis as to whether the correct translation of our ancient texts should include certain individual words. I believe in the grand sweep of our faith, as well as the minutia. In other words, I am a good Jew. And a good Jew must believe that this man in the next room cannot be who he says…that it is an impossibility. If such is my belief, then what good can I do here today?"

Margo Jackson replied, "Rabbi…."

Schmidt raised a single eyebrow and started to correct Margo, when she said, "Sorry…Leo, we didn't invite you here to concur. I invited you so that we, Americans, and, I guess, the world can benefit from your opinion, whatever it may be. If our guest deserves to be endorsed as the Creator he claims to be, so be it. If he deserves to be criticized for his claims, so be it."

"Very well. I certainly don't see any harm in meeting him."

Craig McWilliams asked, "Leo, if you don't mind my asking, why is it, as you put it, 'an impossibility' for our guest to be God?"

Turning to look directly at Craig, Leo replied, "Without an extensive lesson, let's just say that there are several prerequisites to the Coming that haven't been met. And, from my understanding of what has occurred with each of you in his presence, his claims and actions are absolutely not consistent with the true Coming."

"You're referring to His healing of my spine?"

"Yes, for one. The Bible teaches us that the true Lord would not perform miracles and, in fact, would bestow the powers to do them upon charlatans, to test our faith."

"So," Craig continued, "let's say God is up in Heaven and decides to come down here to pick up some more souls. To be recognized by you as God, He has to comply with a bunch of rules, arrive on your terms? I mean, if He's God, can't He come down here any way that He wants?"

Smiling patiently, Schmidt explained, "The prerequisites for His arrival are not a 'bunch of rules' as you put it. They are a promise made by Him. Of all those with whom you might deal, do you not believe that the Lord

would keep His word? He does not need to satisfy any conditions of mine. But He will come as has been foretold."

Looking around the room at all of the faces, Schmidt continued, "My time is limited, as is yours. I suggest that I proceed with this meeting."

Clearing her throat, Margo stood and said, "I'll take you in. This way, please."

She and the Rabbi crossed the room to a door at the far end. She opened it and held it for Schmidt, who entered. Elohim was sitting in his usual spot at the side of the long table. He looked at the Rabbi as they entered, and did not rise. Margo said, "Elohim, this is Rabbi Leo Schmidt. Rabbi, Elohim."

Schmidt had paused just inside the door and did not speak in greeting. Nor did Elohim. The tension in the room was palpable. Nervously, Margo excused herself and pulled the door closed. After a moment's silence, Elohim said, "Did you yearn for the arrival of the Messiah?"

A variety of emotions crossed the Rabbi's face before settling upon amusement. Cocking back his head, he laughed…a loud, raucous laugh. Throughout the long laughter, Elohim just smiled at Schmidt. The laughter slowly subsided and Schmidt, pulling a white handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed his eyes as he took the seat across from Elohim.

Calming himself completely, the Rabbi cleared his throat and asked, "Do you expect to sway me by using a phase that every Hebrew student has been taught?"

"No." Elohim's response was flat and even, as was the expression on his face. Reese and the others were observing the meeting on the video feed, and none of them could read his feelings or intent.

"So," Schmidt continued, "I understand that you've made quite an impression with many others since your arrival."

"I believe so," Elohim replied, again evenly and without any trace of emotion.

Leo Schmidt stared directly at Elohim for some time, as if trying to discern some secret message in the lines of his face. Finally, placing his hands flat on the table before him, he rose, saying, "There doesn't appear to be anything to say."

"This is true," responded Elohim flatly.

Schmidt turned and walked to the doorway, gripping the knob, turning it, and pulling the door open. It was not until he was halfway through the portal that he paused and said, “Why *did* you ask that?”

“You have been taught that the first words you would hear from me would be that question. I saw no harm in fulfilling the prophecy.”

Schmidt turned, still standing in the doorway and said, “No harm? What chutzpah you have! Do you presume to toy with my faith?”

“No.”

The two stared at each other without speaking – Schmidt clearly irritated, Elohim implacable.

Appearing to reach some conclusion, Schmidt returned to his seat, his shoulders slumped. “There are some very fine people out there,” he said, motioning in the direction of the viewing room, “who are trying to do their best in determining your validity. I was asked to participate in this….”

“Charade?” Elohim offered.

Not offended, Schmidt corrected, “Process. I was asked by them to participate in this process, and out of fairness to them, I will.”

“Very well.”

“It *is* difficult for me. It is difficult for me even to be here.”

“I know.”

“Why do you make it so difficult?” Schmidt asked.

“It is not I who make it difficult; it is you who have made it impossible.”

“How so?”

“Other than your own words just minutes ago? Additionally, there would be your belief that I have been sent by the ‘true God’ to attempt to deceive you as a test of your faith.”

“This is all true. But it is my understanding that you have been most cooperative with the others, even skeptics, to convince them that you are….”

“The Creator? Yes, that’s true, I have cooperated with nearly all. The difference was that their minds were open, at least partially. They did not see the consequence of believing me as a betrayal of their faith. Rabbi, how

can we have a discussion as to whether I am Elohim if you cannot even say my name? Is the God that you nurture in your heart so strict and judgmental that He would not allow a candid discussion? Would He not allow a conversation that is merely hypothetical?"

Rabbi Schmidt thought for some time. The silence in the room continued for minutes. As the Rabbi contemplated, Elohim sat silently, not moving a muscle. Eventually, Schmidt began, "I am faced with a great paradox." Elohim listened, saying nothing. Schmidt continued, "If I remain faithful to the word of God and believe that He would never deceive me, then you cannot be God. If, after spending some time speaking with you, I decide to believe you are God, that would make the God in whom all of my people believe…a deceiver…which cannot be."

Elohim answered, "Was it I or was it your sages and prophets who built this box within which you find yourself today?"

"I am not certain that I understand."

"Of course you do, Rabbi. Your ears have never heard my words. You have only read the words of men. Those words have created your dilemma."

"Assuming, just for a moment, that all you say is true…did you not speak to Moshe?"

"I heard his prayers. His prayers were answered. He climbed Mount Sinai as a good man and a deeply troubled man. The people he led were straying from a righteous path. They were succumbing to the primal in all of you. Moses climbed the mountain in search of a way to re-gather the flock. He knew that his words alone would not accomplish that. He returned from the mountain with two sets of tablets. One set he smashed. He told his people that the broken tablets had been carved by my hand. The second set, the unbroken set, had been chiseled by Moses himself."

"I know all of this…why do you repeat it?"

"I am sorry to insult you. I only repeat it to ask you a question, Rabbi. If it were you instead of Moses…if you came down from the mountain with tablets carved by God and tablets carved by your own hand, which set would you have smashed?"

"You imply that Moshe was a fraud! How dare you?"

"I dare because I was there…you were not. And as to whether he was a fraud…that is for you to decide. You believe that he did my work…I am telling you that is true. You believe that the ten laws that he brought down from the mountain were my wishes…that is also true. You believe that he was a holy man and now lives in the Kingdom of Heaven…he does. If those things are important…he is not a fraud. If it is important to you that I spoke with him directly…if it is important to you that it was my hand that carved the tablets…if those things are more important to you than the others…then he was a fraud."

Schmidt was troubled. Forcing himself to a level of calm, he said, "Assuming again, just for a moment, that all you say is true…you did not carve the tablets?"

"Rabbi, he came to the mountain and beseeched me, imploring me for a solution. After the sharpening of the mind that occurs while fasting, the solution became obvious. He needed something to take back to his people that would help them find their way. Again, he begged. He knew that if he returned with only laws that he had created, they would ignore them, as they had ignored his exhortations for some time. He prayed, and he begged for my hand to come down and deliver to him the laws that he needed." Elohim paused for a moment, staring deeply into Schmidt's eyes. "I did not answer that prayer."

"If you are as you say, how could you turn your back on him?"

Elohim smiled and said, "Rabbi, let me tell you a story that the Christians here on Earth love to tell. There was a great flood, and an old religious man, living alone, climbed onto the roof of his house to avoid the waters. Soon two men in a rowboat came by and shouted, 'Jacob, get in the boat; the water is going to get higher.' Jacob responded, 'The Lord will save me,' and refused their help. Soon the water reached the peak of the house, and Jacob had climbed to his chimney. Other neighbors arrived in another rowboat, again begging him to climb aboard and save himself. Again, Jacob refused, claiming that his Lord would save him. The water continued to rise and Jacob found himself standing on the top of his chimney, with the water to his chest. A helicopter flew over and hovered, a man in the helicopter dropping a rope ladder to Jacob. Jacob did not seize the rope and shouted to

the helicopter that the Lord would save him. The helicopter left…the water rose and Jacob drowned. As he reached the gates of Heaven, he saw St. Peter and immediately asked, 'I was certain that my Lord would save me. How could He let me drown?' Saint Peter answered, 'My dear Jacob, we sent two rowboats and a helicopter.'"

Schmidt smiled at the story, adding, "The Lord helps those who help themselves?"

"Yes. How holy a man would Moses have been had he returned from the mountain, thrown up his hands, shrugged, and told his people, 'I asked God for help, and He didn't answer'?"

"The Jews would still be wandering that desert today."

"Perhaps a bit of an overstatement." Elohim smiled at Schmidt again and added, "You should know that Moses was deeply troubled by the deceit he found necessary to commit. It was never a sin, yet he believed it was. For the rest of his days he felt unworthy, so unworthy that he didn't believe he deserved to step upon the promised land."

"If this were all true, it would explain quite a lot. But, as much fun as this hypothetical discussion of history may be, what is it you want from me?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sorry. But I really don't understand. I've read the transcripts of your other meetings. You have said that you decided to make this process gentler than your previous visits, that you prefer an endorsement from all leaders to calm the Chosen before they depart."

"That is all true."

"Do you have such contempt for Jews that you do not need or want an endorsement from me?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"As I said, I've read the transcripts. You have mentioned Jesus many times as your son. If you were who you say, how could you forgive us for not accepting him as such?"

"Because I forgive all and forget nothing. My beloved Son came to Earth to offer a spiritual drink of water to the thirsty. Would those who were not thirsty and refused a sip anger me?"

“Then why the disdain? You must feel it if you do not court my endorsement.”

“Rabbi, have you grown so accustomed to your role as a victim that you would accuse your Creator of being anti-Semitic?”

“If I believed that you were my Creator, this would be a much different discussion. If you do not disdain the Jews of the world, then why do you not want my voice added to the chorus?”

“For several reasons. The first being one already discussed. To use your phrase from before…assuming, just for a moment, that all that I say is true…you have two choices. Your first choice is to publicly declare that I am a charlatan, thereby publicly declaring that those who maintain otherwise are fools. The benefit of this is that you maintain your coveted status as a revered rabbi. Your other choice is to declare that I am Elohim, your Creator. You would make that statement, knowing that all of the beliefs of Judaism make your declaration an impossibility and a sacrilege. The other great rabbis would condemn you, and your followers would abandon you.”

“That is all true.”

“Rabbi, you are not alone in your dilemma. I have one, as well. There are certain beliefs within Judaism that are not the path to Heaven. You are a good man and deserve to be one of the Chosen but perhaps not for the reason you might think. My dilemma is that we have spent time today discussing many things, and before you leave this room, we will discuss more. These things need to be shared with your fellow Jews. If you choose to, as you phrased it, endorse me, your effectiveness as a teacher among Jews will be destroyed. Furthermore, although this is my third visit, it shall not be my last. You cannot correct the beliefs, which must be corrected in order to put more of your faithful on the right path, if you are not here on Earth.”

“Are you saying that observant Jews will not go to Heaven?”

“No, I am not. There are many within your faith who will join me soon. What I am saying is that there are many who would have joined me who will not. If the teachings of your faith had been slightly different for those souls, they would be a part of the Chosen.”

"Could you please explain?"

"Of course. In the past, both distant and recent, the Jews have faced difficulties. From the Nazis and Russians, back through the Romans and Egyptians and many others, your coexistence with non-Jews has been turbulent. It is, of course, human nature to pull together and exclude all others. You said that you have read the transcripts of my earlier discussions. If so, you will recall my description of Heaven. The actual blank canvas upon which Heaven is painted is real. However, all that is upon it is a construct, a collaborative construct that is made by all who live there. In Heaven, the actual fiber of the chair at your dining room table is filled with the contributions of all. There is no envy…there is no distrust…there is no thought of placing anyone, or any group, above another. If there were, the construct could not exist as it does. It would no longer be Heaven.

"There are Jews who, down to the very core of their souls, believe that this is as it should be on Earth. They do not distinguish between the Jew and the non-Jew. They do not have a separate set of standards of conduct when dealing with a Jew or non-Jew. They believe that when their sons or daughters marry a good person, it is a time to rejoice, regardless of the faith of the new spouse. They are the ones who are chosen. Unfortunately, there are many Jews who believe that only Jews belong in Heaven. There are many Jews who believe that their sons or daughters who marry a non-Jew have sinned and should be cast out of the family. There are many who believe that, although being dishonest with another Jew is a sin, a lie told to a non-Jew is nothing. How can a person who believes these things be a positive addition to Heaven?"

"These horrible things that you describe are not what we teach."

"No, my friend, these things are not what *you* have taught. And that is why the Gates of Heaven are open to you. You know, indeed you have argued with, many rabbis who do believe as I described…who have taught the children in their temples to believe these things."

"I am sad to say that this is true. It is the nature of Judaism that it contains many voices. It is a religion of tribes."

"Those within your faith who have led their tribes away from Heaven, rather than toward it, must be taught. They must be taught to forget the

ancient and not-so-ancient transgressions, rather than celebrate them as a badge of honor…they must be taught that excluding others because they might become your enemy makes them your enemy. Those were the lessons my Son tried to share."

Schmidt said wistfully, "My choice, assuming just for a moment that all you say is true, is either to be part of the Chosen…to leave this Earth and live with you in Heaven, enjoying eternal happiness…or to remain here and try to adjust the course of my faith amidst the chaos and misery that is certain to follow your departure so that perhaps thousands of years from now, when you return, our distant descendants can attain bliss?"

"Yes."

"May I, upon my death, join you…assuming just for a moment that all you say is true?"

"After your life has ended, your soul must wait until my next return before you may join me in Heaven. Whether you are chosen is a question which can only be answered with time. I do not know your future, nor do I know the future of your world, but I can tell you that, as it has been twice before, you will be sorely tested. Remember…many of those who would be your allies will have departed. "

"I would be like a man left with a hostile tribe after the rest of his troop retreated."

"Yes. Assuming, just for a moment, that all I say is true."

Staring down at the table for a very long time, Rabbi Schmidt finally sighed, turning loose the tension that had been within him. "You're right, of course. There can be no good outcome from this meeting for me."

"Or for me," said Elohim gently. "Should you choose to join me, many of my children on Earth will not be given a chance to change their course, and they will be deprived of their place in Heaven. Should you choose to stay, I may be deprived of the joy of your company."

Looking up at Elohim, with only the slightest trace of tears in his eyes, Leo Schmidt smiled. The smile gradually grew to a soft laugh, the laughter ascending until the room was filled with its sound. Elohim joined him, and both reddened with joyous laughter. Eventually, the laughter subsided.

Catching his breath, the Rabbi, in a soft voice, said, “You were right when you said that you want nothing from me.”

“In a sense, yes.”

“No fruit shall come from my participation in this process.”

“It cannot.”

“And…if…you depart and take the Chosen with you, I will know.”

“Yes. You will.”

“Do you need my decision? My decision as to whether I will go with you?”

“I already know your decision, my friend.”

Leo stared at Elohim, unblinking, as if trying to memorize every detail of his face. At last he stood. He drew a long, slow breath and said, “It was a pleasure meeting You…Elohim,” extending his hand.

Elohim rose and walked around the table to the Rabbi. Ignoring the outstretched hand, he stepped in and embraced him. Leo Schmidt wrapped his arms around Elohim and wept.

Chapter Twenty

William Burke sat at his desk at home, looking out the window as his wife pushed his youngest son on the swing Burke had built in the backyard. Her long, thick red hair bounced and swayed as the midday sun shimmered off every strand. The playful squeal that burst from his son with each push penetrated the closed window and filled the study, as well as his heart. His fingers traced the edges of the file that had been delivered to him by courier from his office. When his assistant, Christine, called, she had told him that they had been successful in finding the child. The file contained his name, the name of his adoptive parents, their address, the name and address of his preschool, and all of the other information Burke had requested shortly after leaving his brief meeting with Elohim. His staff had worked quickly and efficiently.

The phone on his desk rang. It was the phone installed by the NSA, a secure line. “Bill, Clayton Dean. How are you?”

“I’m good, Clay. And you?”

“I’m well. Margo and the Chief should be on the line in a moment. I was just a little concerned about you.”

“Well, for someone whose life has been turned upside down, I’m okay.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Unless you have a time machine gathering dust next to that StairMaster in your basement…no.”

Burke had known Clayton for years, and it was with Dean that he had shared the rough outline of his situation.

“You’ll tell me if there is?”

“Promise.”

There was a click on the line, and suddenly Margo Jackson joined them.

“Hi, guys.”

Although Bill Burke was used to the casualness that Margo exhibited when dealing with superiors, he knew that it still bothered Dean.

“Margo,” he said, mostly for his friend’s benefit, “when you were a Marine, did you greet your superior officers that way?”

“What do you mean, when I was a Marine? Once a Marine, you’re a Marine for life. And to answer your question, I greeted them with a proper ‘sir’ every time. Those were the rules. Do I detect a new rule in the offing?”

Burke, smiling, was about to respond, when the line clicked again, and the White House switchboard announced that the President was coming on the line. There was another click, and they all heard the President’s voice say, “Good afternoon, everyone.”

Bill and Clayton both answered, “Good afternoon, sir,” as did Margo. The President was, after all, the Commander-in-Chief.

The President said, “Bill, thanks for joining us. I know you’re on a personal leave.”

“Not a problem, sir. I feel bad about bailing out during this…situation.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t be doing it if it wasn’t necessary.”

With this comment, Burke felt a twinge of guilt, quickly squelched by a glance out the window at his son and wife.

The President continued, “Margo, any changes?”

“Well, sir, we’re not going to have Rabbi Schmidt at the public statement.”

“No? He doesn’t buy Elohim?”

She paused for a moment, trying to decide the best way to answer. “It’s more complicated than that. I’m not totally clear on his intentions, but I’ll be surprised if he comes out with a statement on the other side, either.”

Bill Burke said, “Margo, I’m not sure I understand. How did his meeting go with Elohim?”

“Well…it had all of us in tears, including the Rabbi. He’s in a ‘damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t’ situation. Basically, all of the beliefs of the Jews state absolutely that Elohim cannot be who he says. By the end of the meeting, Schmidt was swayed, I guess. He left without discussing it with us. Anyway…if he gets up with us and says that Elohim is the Coming, instead of convincing any Jews, he’ll just blow his own credibility with them. Because to say that, he’d be saying that every sage and prophet in the history of Judaism was full of…baloney.”

“I see,” said the President. “I sympathize with his position.”

Clayton Dean chuckled. “I’m sure you do, sir. If you publicly buy into this, you’ll be playing right into the hands on the other side of the aisle who think you’re a….”

“Born-again religious fanatic?”

“Uh…yes, sir.”

The President continued, “Bill, I wanted you to join us on this call because you are one of my staff who has also met with Elohim, as has Margo. Here’s my question for the three of you… and for right now let’s make it just a theoretical question. We’ve handled this as well as we can. Our statement is just going to lay out the facts of our investigation. Clay’s going to be there to provide our administration’s disclaimer. If Elohim turns out to be a fraud, albeit an incredibly talented and clever fraud, we haven’t done a lot of damage to ourselves.”

Bill Burke could see the direction he was going. Their boss resumed.

“If, on the other hand, he is…our Lord” – the President’s voice trembled noticeably with the last word – “aren’t our political concerns a bit superficial and trivial in the scheme of things?”

Clayton Dean was the first to respond. “Sir, you’re not thinking about coming out on this, are you? You haven’t even met him.”

“Clay, that’s part of what’s bothering me. How much hubris does it take to keep God sitting in your waiting room because you are too important? Sometimes I think we get a little too full of ourselves.”

“I agree,” said Margo.

“MARGO!” chastised Burke.

“I’m not criticizing you, sir,” explained Margo, addressing the President. “I’m applying what you said to myself. And to history.”

“History?” the President asked.

“Well, there might have been a different ending if King Herod had spent a little one-on-one time with Jesus.”

“Actually, Margo, I think you mean Caesar. King Herod died just before Christ’s birth. But I see your point.”

“I think it would be a mistake,” advised Dean.

“I’m just not sure. Sitting back while all of you deal with this doesn’t feel right. I mean, we wouldn’t dream of assigning you, Clayton, to handle Putin when he visits. As I said, if Elohim is our Lord, he certainly deserves a greater accommodation than a mere Cabinet member. Bill, you’re quiet on this. What do you think?”

“Well, sir…,” Bill Burke paused, formulating his thoughts. “I think you are in the same position as Rabbi Schmidt. Maybe even worse.”

Curious, the President asked, “How so, Bill?”

“There are only two possibilities…actually three if you include a concern held by Reese Johnson. The first is that Elohim is a fraud. If He is…which I don’t personally believe by the way, a meeting with the President wouldn’t be a good thing all around.”

“I agree,” said the President.

“The second possibility is that He is not mortal but He is not God. He is, in fact, the devil.” Burke paused, expecting a reaction. Receiving none, he continued, “Again, a meeting between you and Satan would not be a good thing…no matter how you look at it.”

“True,” agreed the President, his voice neutral.

“The third possibility is that Elohim is God. If so, He has come down to Earth to effectuate another Judgment Day…this time trying it without all of the fire and brimstone. His spoken explanation, from what I’ve read of the transcripts and what I’ve been told, is to make the transition for the Chosen, as well as those left behind, a little smoother…less traumatic. Your presidency, if I may be candid, sir….”

“Please…I would appreciate candor right now.”

“Your presidency has been something of a lightning rod for controversy, particularly when it comes to issues of faith. I guess what I’m saying is… the fact that all of this has happened on ‘your watch’ has already caused many people to doubt Elohim’s authenticity, people who might not have doubted at another time.”

Burke hesitated, hoping he did not need to explain further.

The President immediately relieved his concern by saying, “You think my presence, my direct involvement, would hinder Elohim in the pursuit of his goal.”

All parties on the conference call were quiet…allowing their boss to assimilate Burke's opinion. After half a minute, the President sighed loudly, saying, "He hasn't exactly asked to meet with me."

"No, sir. He hasn't," agreed Margo.

"You are right, Bill. This is a miserable situation to be in. You are also right that I shouldn't meet with him."

"It is a no-win situation, sir," added Clayton.

They all waited through another long pause, before they heard the President say, "So be it."

As Bill Burke hung up, he heard the doorbell, knowing it was his sister there to take Will, Jr. to the park so Bill could have some time alone with Mary. He picked up the file containing his son's information. "One thing is for sure," he said to himself, "after meeting Him, you know what to do." He leaned to the side of his desk and dropped the file, unopened, into the shredder. Glancing outside once again, he smiled, relieved that what he needed to do was finally crystal clear.

א

Lynn Sheffield saw the type of bar he was looking for and pulled in. The lot was filled with pickup trucks, and country music poured out the front door. 'Just the right kind of place,' he thought to himself. His eyes stung from the cigarette smoke as he went in, sliding onto a bar stool.

א

Reese sat at one corner of the conference table, huddled over a laptop and composing his statement. Claire was next to him, reading as he typed, murmuring comments or suggestions softly. Margo Jackson, at the opposite end, was also working on her statement, with a pencil and legal pad. Penfield, needing solitude, had borrowed an empty visitors' office. Reynolds and McWilliams were not present. Hanging from the ceiling behind Reese was a projection screen showing the video feed from the room in which Elohim sat quietly, staring into the distance.

Staring at the LCD screen, Reese spoke to Claire, softly so as to not bother Margo. “Honey, this is weird.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just a few days ago I was working on my lecture for class, worrying about toning it down a little to avoid a repeat of the Harvard fiasco, trying to soften the ‘God’ thing a little. I mean, I guess, subconsciously I was giving in to the pressure.”

“That’s how they work. It’s inexorable. They never give up and just keep repeating it until people start to believe it.”

“Like Hawk.”

“Exactly. Going through that helped you…helped you to recognize what they were doing.”

“You know, this time it was God. They decided that He didn’t exist, that He was a crutch for the feeble-minded, an opiate for the masses as Karl Marx said, that believing in Him was a threat to enlightenment, to science, to intelligent thinking. People don’t want to think of themselves as feeble-minded, as a threat to enlightenment. Good grief, it’s powerful.”

“And what would be next?”

“I don’t know. Who would have dreamed that it would come this far? Once the mechanism is in place…you can use it on anything. Hell, you could pick incest, and start releasing studies showing that sex between a mother and a thirteen-year-old son is really not unhealthy. In fact, sons who have been through it grow up to be more successful, happier, and live longer. The only damage that’s caused is a result of the judgmentalism of the public.”

“And also, they could say that it’s natural. Anthropologists have found tribes, who are uncontaminated by western morals, that practice it and function just fine.”

“Exactly. Then, we’d start seeing television shows where the mother and son kiss on-screen. The first time it would be controversial. But all of the sociologists would come on the talk shows and explain how good it is for this dialogue to finally commence. The next step would be a movie.”

“Which would sweep all of the Golden Globe awards.”

“After winning top honors at Cannes and Sundance.”

“Don’t forget the activist groups.”

“That’s right. The MASWL, Mothers and Sons Who Love, would have parades and picnics and fund-raisers.”

“Don’t be a sexist. You forgot about FADWL.”

“Fathers and Daughters….”

“Right.”

“Now you’re offending ‘Fathers and Sons Who Love’ and ‘Mothers and Daughters Who Love.’”

“I forgot. Wait. We need to stop this. I’m getting sick.”

Reese said, “I’ve been getting sick for the last twenty years. Anyway, to get to what I was saying…just a few days ago I was softening the ‘God’ angle, and today I’m sitting in a room not thirty feet from someone that I’m convinced is He…and writing a statement to that effect which I’m about to deliver to the world.”

“Reese, what’s going to happen to them?”

“Who?”

“The ‘they’ we’ve been talking about…the ones who have been trying to stamp out His existence.”

“From what Elohim said, they just stay here.”

“They stay, and the believers go with Elohim…I think that’s going to make them very happy. Elohim is going to take away the people they’ve seen as their enemies, leaving them the run of the place here.”

“It’s pretty presumptuous of us to think we know who’s on His list. From what I gather, just being religious doesn’t get you the ‘E’ ticket to Heaven.”

“Reese, you’re dating yourself. Disneyland hasn’t used ‘E’ tickets in a long time.”

“Thanks. Anyway, my gut feeling is that when the Chosen leave, there are going to be some surprised zealots remaining – people who were certain they’d be among the ones chosen. If they’re still around, the rest won’t be all that happy.”

Nicholas Reynolds entered the room, carrying a single slip of paper. Nodding at Margo, he walked to Reese and Claire and handed it to them. “I

thought you might want this right away."

Reese took the paper, recognizing it as a lab test printout. At the top was printed his name. Underneath were Matthew's and Melissa's. At mid-page, next to "Paternity Results," the box under "Positive" was checked. Claire was reading the form over Reese's shoulder and, upon seeing the positive result, let out a quick sobbing sound, grabbing his arm tightly.

Reynolds turned to walk away. Reese, finding his voice, said, "Nicholas, thank you."

Reynolds replied, "Sure thing," turning to leave. He paused for a moment and said to both of them, "Congratulations," a slight smile on his face.

Before he could reach the doorway, the door opened and four Secret Service agents entered, followed by the President. Margo jumped up immediately, turning to face him. Claire and Reese, still stunned, managed to rise as well.

"Margo, good to see you."

"And you, sir. I guess you changed your mind."

The President's eyes connecting with Margo's, he answered softly, "Let's just say that the wisdom of your words finally did sink in." Clearing his throat, he raised his voice slightly and asked, "Where is our guest? We have less than an hour."

Glancing at the projection screen, Margo said, "In the next room," gesturing toward the far door. One of the Secret Service agents, apparently the senior of the group, nodded toward the door, and two of the men started forward.

"Colin," said the President, addressing the agent in charge, "what are you doing?"

"Sir, if you're going in there, we need to check him out."

Margo started to explain that Elohim had already passed through the State Department security scans, when the President cut her off. "Colin, there are at least some people here who think he may be God. I don't know if he is or not. But until we figure this out, I will not have him frisked. Besides, from what I've been told, if he wanted a gun, he could materialize one."

The two agents, who were halfway to the far doorway, stopped, looking at their senior for guidance. Rather than waiting for Colin to give the order, the President looked at them and firmly said, “Have a seat…in here.” Looking at Colin, he said, “All of you.”

“Sir, at least let me go in with you. No one even knows who this guy is. He has no history, nothing.”

Reese spoke from across the room. “He has a lot more history than all of us put together.”

Trying to change the subject, Margo asked, “Were you able to get over here quietly?”

Shrugging, the President answered, “As quietly as I can go anywhere. I think the scheme that Colin cooked up was the five different caravans trick. But it seemed to work. Didn’t see any press along the way.”

Turning to Reese, he said, “Dr. Johnson, I understand that you’ve been walking ‘point’ on this one?”

“Yes, sir, I have. It has been quite a trip so far.” Reese was still clutching the lab results. “Mr. President, this is my wife, Claire.”

The man quickly walked the length of the table, extending his hand to her. “A pleasure, Mrs. Johnson. I’m quite a fan of your husband.”

She smiled brightly. “So am I. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Turning to Reese, he asked, “Anything I should know before I go in?”

“You mean other than having your world turned upside down…no, sir.”

From behind the President, Colin, the Secret Service agent, asked, “What’s the deal with this handshake?” It was obvious from the question that he thought it was some kind of threat.

“The deal,” Reese answered, “is like nothing you’ve ever felt…at least for me.”

“Should the President avoid it?”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for all the money on Earth,” answered Reese honestly.

The President listened to this, smiling. Reaching out, he shook Reese’s hand and said, “Thank you for your service on this. I mean it. I know that it has been…well….”

“A long, strange trip,” Claire finished for him.

“Another Grateful Dead fan,” said the President, smiling again. Claire was amazed at his ability to put her at ease.

“Just that song,” she answered.

“Well, I’d better get in there.”

With that he turned and walked purposefully to the door, swinging it open and striding in. No one had noticed on the screen that Elohim had risen and was waiting near the door. The President caught himself before he bumped into Elohim, extending his hand and saying, ”Elohim, I have been waiting for this opportunity.”

“As have I,” Elohim answered, taking his hand. Immediately, the effect of their touch swept over the President. Biting his lower lip, his forehead furrowed and his eyes teared. The contact only lasted for twenty seconds, both releasing their grips at the same moment. Elohim moved to a chair at the table, as did the President. They both sat on the same side, next to and facing each other.

Elohim spoke first. “It has been a difficult road for you these last few years.”

“It has been…,” the President replied, “challenging.”

“Overall, you’ve done well.”

“Thank You for that. But I’ve made many mistakes.”

“Yes, you have. But they were the mistakes of a well-intentioned man. And you have traveled uncharted waters; mistakes are inevitable.”

“Thank You for answering my prayers in my times of need.”

“I have answered no prayers of yours.”

Stunned by the response, the President said, “But, I thought….”

“The only prayer that I answered was from your mother, who asked me to give you the strength for the task.”

Thinking back over his terms, the President said, “There were times when I felt Your presence…when I felt Your hand guide me. Was I deluding myself?”

“If your belief was that *my* hand guided you, then, yes, you did delude yourself. If your belief was that there was a wise and loving hand to help

you in your times of need, it was no delusion."

"Then whose hand was it?"

"It was the hand of your people…*they* heard your prayers and *they* answered. Those were their hearts and their souls that you felt during your darkest hours…and it was their love."

"Love? A scarce commodity."

"Not if you know where to look."

"There is so much anger in the world. I have felt so much hatred…for me."

"My dear son, do you remember when you were very young and your father was gone for so long?"

"I do. Government service is like that. He was gone for almost two years. We only saw him occasionally, and they were brief visits."

"How were the visits?"

"Wonderful. We had so much fun – camped and played ball with him. It was great."

"And how did you feel when he returned for good?"

"We were ecstatic…at first."

"What happened?"

"He wasn't happy with how we had changed while he was gone. He thought we had gotten spoiled and lazy. There weren't any camping trips… no baseball."

"What did he do?"

"He rode us unmercifully. He made home feel like a boot camp."

"How did you and your brothers feel then?"

"We were furious. We thought he'd become a tyrant…a monster."

"Didn't you tell him one day that you hated him?"

The President's eyes widened, suddenly remembering. "Yes. I wanted a weekend away, away from him mostly. He inspected my room and found some clothes my mother had washed that I hid in the corner of the closet instead of putting them away. He grounded me." His eyes shifted and focused on something in the distance. "I was so mad. I screamed at him. I told him I hated him. I didn't speak to him for three weeks."

“Did you really hate him?”

“I guess so…I mean, at that moment, I guess I did. We didn’t…it took such a long time until we were close after that.”

“Do you hate him now?”

“No! I love that man with all my heart.”

“So, over the years he has changed quite a lot.”

“No, he didn’t change…I did. I needed that period of strictness. I had slipped, quite a bit actually…at home and at school. He put me back on the right track. I wouldn’t be the person I am today without him…without what he did.”

“He could have returned home after the two years and just tried to be your friend, the way he had on the visits.”

“I think I’m getting your point.”

“I am certain that you are. Your people needed a firm hand. Under previous leaders they had strayed too far.”

“That’s what I believed.”

“You were right. And now many of them feel about you the same way you felt about your father on that horrible day. You did have a choice. You could have been their friend, pandering to the whims of the majority, a temptation to which so many leaders succumb. You chose to do your job.”

“I eventually came around with my father. Will they?”

“As it was with you, not for a very long time.”

A look of sadness crossed the President’s face, but only for a moment. “We have only a short time until the scheduled statement. How do you think it will be received?”

“I only seek a small audience. They will receive it as they should. For many of the rest, it will not be pleasant.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The State Department briefing room was filled to capacity, far exceeding its maximum allowable occupancy. In the audience were representatives from all of the news organizations, as well as field correspondents from the various feature, or soft news, programs. Also in the audience were the few members of the House and Senate who were mostly from the southern states and not afraid to be associated with anything religious. The jumble of cables and light stands made it nearly impossible to walk, creating a fire marshal's nightmare.

The members of the group were about to make their statements. Clayton Dean, Margo Jackson, Reese Johnson, Walter Penfield, and Craig McWilliams were clustered in the corner, trying to speak to one another over the cacophony. Margo was saying, "I think adding Craig to the group is a good idea."

"You're right," agreed Dean. "He has become a focal person in the press. If we didn't include him, this thing would be dominated by questions about him." Looking at his watch, Dean added, "We had better get started. Everyone ready?"

They nodded, all clutching their notes a little too firmly. "Okay, let's get…."

The chatter in the room elevated noticeably. Clayton turned to determine what had caused the additional noise, and saw Rabbi Schmidt enter. Schmidt noticed him at the same time and worked his way patiently across the room toward them.

"I'll be damned," said Margo.

As he reached the group, Reese said, "I'm very glad you decided to join us, Leo."

Schmidt was smiling, almost beaming. "It is amazing the relief one feels when a decision is made. I'm not certain I'll speak, but it would be cowardly for me not to stand with you today."

Clayton said, "Do you think this group will let you stand with us and not demand a comment?"

Glancing over his shoulder at the unruly press corps, Leo said, “I’ve performed services in Brooklyn. Do you really think this is a tougher group?”

Laughing, Dean slapped him on the back. “Welcome aboard. Well… let’s get this show on the road.”

“Before you do, I must ask…is Elohim not to be here for this?”

“He’s here,” Reese answered. “He’s in the other room. It didn’t feel right to me to plunge Him into this before we all spoke.”

“You are not afraid that bringing Him out after everyone speaks will look too much like a Hollywood unveiling?” Leo asked, nearly shouting to be heard.

“Any suggestions?”

“He has faced much worse than a bunch of smug, self-important reporters. I say bring Him in.”

Reese turned to the others. Margo agreed, “It makes sense to me.”

Craig and Clayton nodded.

Reese crossed behind the podium and exited. A moment later he returned with Elohim, who barely glanced at the throng as he walked along the front of the room to join the group. Starting with the reporters closest to his entrance, heads swiveled to see who had entered. None of them had seen Elohim or his picture; yet, as they looked at him, they stopped talking. The spreading silence captured the attention of those farther back. As they craned to see, they became silent, slowly lowering themselves into their chairs. Within thirty seconds of his arrival, the room was nearly silent, and all but the small group at the front were seated.

Craig, observing the effect, whispered to the group, “This is weird. It’s like a….”

“Church,” Reese offered.

“No,” corrected Schmidt, “a synagogue.”

Reese turned to Elohim and whispered, “This is a little different for You, isn’t it?”

Elohim smiled and said, “As opposed to arriving on a pillar of smoke, bracketed by lightning bolts?”

“That is the image of Your Coming that most have.”

“Those who have written of my arrival have much reverence…and a vivid imagination to match.”

“Well, here goes!” said Clayton, moving to the podium.

“Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. As this situation is unprecedented, I appreciate your patience and cooperation. Four days ago, this gentleman” – he gestured toward Elohim – “arrived at the Hoover Building and asked to speak with William Burke, the Director of the FBI. After submitting him to normal security procedures, Director Burke agreed to see him. It was during that meeting that our guest informed us that he was…our Creator.” There was a slight murmur in the audience. Clayton continued, “Director Burke is not here to describe the details of the meeting; however, our guest was persuasive enough for him to believe that further investigation was warranted.

“At that point, Craig McWilliams was assigned to the investigation. Agent McWilliams did not personally conduct any interviews at that time. He brought in a number of linguists from Fort Detrick…all experts in their particular languages. All spent time with our guest, conversing with him in their languages of specialization. From the reports that I’ve reviewed, all of which will be handed out to each of you at the end of this statement, our guest was found to be fluent in each language, fluent to the degree of it being, in the opinion of the linguists, his native tongue. The languages involved were originally the major current languages in the world, including French, German, Spanish, Slavic, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and so on. At that point, Agent McWilliams brought in specialists of several obscure and ‘dead’ languages, including Aramaic, Latin, and others. Again, our guest displayed a mastery of each without exception. I have spoken with two notable linguistic professors, who have authored many books on the subject, and they concur that there is not a living person they are aware of who has demonstrated anything approaching this ability.

“It was then that Agent McWilliams, who heads the FBI profiling unit and holds a degree in psychology, began his interviews. I will let him speak as to his findings, but suffice it to say that he felt there was sufficient reason to proceed to the next level of the investigation. Due to the nature of our

guest's claim, we felt that it was important to bring in an expert on multiple religions, rather than a representative of a specific faith. It was decided to recruit Dr. Reese Johnson. His formal training in anthropology and psychology, as well as his lifelong specialization in the study of all religions, seemed to make him a perfect choice.

"Of all of the investigators, Dr. Johnson has spent the most time with our guest. It was during his first meeting that our guest disclosed his name…Elohim. Dr. Johnson will describe his own findings in a few moments.

"At Dr. Johnson's request, we also brought in Walter Penfield who, as most of you know, specializes in mathematics and physics. Dr. Penfield conducted his own interviews with Elohim and will speak as to the result of those.

"As a personal favor, Director Burke asked Archbishop Coughlin to meet with Elohim. Subsequent to this meeting, the Archbishop made a public statement that you have all seen. Archbishop Coughlin has fallen into ill health and will not be available for comment at this time. As a result of the Archbishop's meeting with Elohim, Cardinal Mario Bonavente requested and was granted a meeting. He, also, is not present today to describe the outcome of that meeting.

"Since the Catholic Church had been given an opportunity to meet with Elohim, the Acting Director of the FBI, Margo Jackson, felt it appropriate to invite Rabbi Leo Schmidt, who agreed to meet with Elohim. Rabbi Schmidt is not on our schedule of speakers, and although he is present today, I don't know what, if anything, he plans to share of his meeting with Elohim.

"I would like to entertain questions periodically during this statement. I ask that we maintain some decorum and that the questions asked pertain to statements which have been made up to that point only. We will open things up for unlimited questions after everyone on the dais has spoken. Any questions at this point?"

Rather than the normal shouting, the reporters quietly raised their hands. Dean selected one.

“Mr. Secretary, did anything occur during the Archbishop’s meeting with Elohim that caused his collapse?”

“I really can’t answer that. Our audio and video monitoring malfunctioned during that meeting, and no one was able to hear what transpired. I suggest that you contact the Cardinal for additional information. Yes?”

“Were all of the interviews with the people you mentioned videotaped, and are those tapes available?”

“We attempted both video and audio recordings. All of our attempts failed. We do not have a single moment of recording.” Several hands shot up at once, obviously prompted by this information. Clayton went on, “Before you ask, let me explain. Our initial meeting room was an interrogation room at the FBI. This room is well equipped with state of the art recording equipment and staffed with competent technicians. Those in the outer observation room were able to watch and listen to the proceedings on video and audio. However, when we played back the tapes, they were blank. The technicians replaced the equipment several times and rechecked all of the wiring. All indications were that the equipment was recording. However, when those tapes were played back, they were blank. I have no further information than that. Next question?”

“Why is Bill Burke not here?”

“In the midst of this investigation, Bill requested and was granted a personal leave. I do not know the reasons for the request.”

“Is he ill? Is his absence a result of meeting with Elohim?”

“No, I’ve spoken with him, and he is not ill. He has not stated to me that his leave is a result of the meeting.”

“Are there written transcripts of the interviews?”

“Yes, when we discovered our recording difficulties, we brought in a court stenographer to produce transcripts. We transcribed all of the meetings, except for Archbishop Coughlin’s. Those minutes, in our opinion, are the property of each of the interviewers, as some of the content is highly personal. It will be up to each of our participants to release complete or redacted versions. Yes?”

“Does Elohim have any background that you’ve been able to find?”

“As I asked, please confine your questions to statements made. Margo Jackson will be speaking shortly to address those issues. Any further questions?”

No hands were raised. “In that case, I’d like to bring Margo up.”

Margo Jackson reached the podium quickly.

“Thank you, Mr. Secretary.” Margo took a moment to organize her thoughts before speaking. “During the few days since Elohim’s arrival, we have done an extensive check on him, utilizing fingerprinting, DNA database, face recognition, et cetera. With the exception of one…anomalous result, we have found nothing. He carries no identification or credit cards. Elohim is not in our database…nor is he in the databases of Interpol and other international sources. In fact, when Elohim first arrived at the Hoover Building, our people checked the building perimeter video. I’d like to show that video at this time.”

A technician turned on the plasma screen mounted to the wall to Margo’s left. The video was split into two halves of the screen, each showing a different view of the exterior entrance of the Hoover Building. Using a pointer to refer to the right half, Margo resumed, “As you’ll notice, this view shows the front doors of the building; the other view is several feet farther from the doors. If you watch the left side, you’ll be able to see all of the pedestrians approaching the building….” Margo selected an unidentified woman, wearing a distinctive red dress, and used the pointer to single the woman out as she walked up the steps toward the entrance. “If you will all watch this woman, you’ll see that she is visible in the left frame as she walks up the steps. As she nears the entrance, she is visible in both frames, as the views overlap by approximately ten feet.” The press silently watched as the woman was in both frames, viewed from different angles. Her image then exited the left frame, showing only in the right view until she walked through the front entrance.

“Now, as we continue to run the same video, you can see several people coming and going. They all pass from one view to another. There is no other way to approach the entrance without passing through this left frame.” The audience stared at the screen, as if trying to catch a trick.

“I direct your attention now to the right-hand screen. Coming from the left side of that frame, Elohim is visible. He walks across the view and through the entrance.” There were a few muffled exclamations from the reporters. “Yes, as many of you noticed, he did not pass through the earlier view. In fact, backing up both videos….” The technician rewound the synchronized views. “You’ll see that when Elohim was visible in the right-hand frame at the point where he should have been visible in both, he wasn’t. He only appeared in the right frame…the frame closer to the entrance. The other pedestrians walking in proximity to him are visible in both, yet he is not.”

Margo paused for a moment, as the group stared at the two frozen images. Elohim, locked in mid-stride on the right, could not be seen on the left. All of the others were plainly in the same frozen position; yet, the spot where Elohim should have been in the left frame instead showed only the uninterrupted background.

“We have no explanation for this and, to be honest with you, have not yet asked Elohim to explain the…anomaly. I did not receive this video until hours ago. I’m afraid that the security officer who noticed it was not comfortable bringing it to my attention until he became aware of this meeting.” Most of the eyes in the room looked at Elohim, who sat impassively at the table with the others.

“This video is being copied as we speak and will be made available to each of you at the end of this conference. Before I turn this over to Craig McWilliams, does anyone have any questions? Yes, sir?”

“You mentioned one anomalous match earlier. What was that?”

Margo smiled, looking slightly embarrassed. “I probably shouldn’t have referred to it at all, since it seems rather, well…prejudicial. After running Elohim’s face through all of the normal databases with no hits, an extremely zealous investigator ran a facial comparison search engine on the Internet.” Glancing toward the video tech, Margo said, “Vince, could you bring up the slide.” Turning back to the reporters, she said, “This was the hit that we received.” As she spoke, a slightly off-to-the-side view of Elohim’s face from the security video appeared on the left side of the screen. On the right side was the Michelangelo painting *The Birth of Adam*, in which Adam is

brought to life by God's touch. The image of the painting was then cropped to show just the face of God. As the cropped image zoomed to fill the right side of the screen, there was an audible gasp from some of the press members. At the bottom of the screen, computer-generated text stated that there was a seventeen-point match.

Grinning sardonically, Margo remarked, "Like I said, slightly prejudicial. Any other questions? Okay…Craig?"

Craig McWilliams replaced Margo at the podium. Because of the widespread coverage regarding his "cure," the intensity of the press corps palpably increased at the prospect of questioning him, with many shifting forward to the edge of their seats.

"Good afternoon. I'm Craig McWilliams, and I have headed up the profiling unit with the FBI for seven years. I was asked by Director Burke to oversee the investigation of Elohim and His claims. Ms. Jackson has already described the first phases of the investigation, which included the linguists and our background check. I'm going to cover my interviews with Elohim. During our discussions, Elohim displayed an uncanny ability to describe events, conversations, and even other people's thoughts that had occurred not in His presence. In addition, Elohim provided me with the names and addresses of several criminals who had successfully eluded the FBI and local law enforcement for several years. These suspects have since been apprehended, preliminary evidence has been gathered, and some confessions have been obtained, indicating a strong likelihood of convictions for these suspects. The specifics on these arrests are provided in the handout that all of you will receive at the end of this statement.

"Although it would be an extraordinary claim in itself, I began to suspect that Elohim was simply an extremely gifted psychic. When I confronted Elohim with this suspicion, He performed a…miracle, for lack of a better word. As has been well covered in the media recently, I suffered from a severed spine as a result of a gunshot wound and have been paralyzed from the waist down for nearly twenty years. My spine is completely healed, which according to my doctors is a medical impossibility, and my recovery has been total. Due to the importance of these events, I have decided to waive my rights to privacy and have

provided full medical documentation on this recovery, which is also in your handout.

"The balance of my investigation will be best described by the remaining speakers…so I'll take some questions. Yes?"

"What was the miracle like? Could you describe it?"

"I assume that you are asking if there were any theatrics or flashes of blinding light or any Hollywood special effects. The answer is no. In fact, when Elohim and I were discussing a miracle, He told me that mine had already occurred and reached over and pinched my leg. I felt the pinch, and that was the first sensation I had felt below the waist in two decades. Next question…yes?"

"Do you believe that he is God?"

"Yes," Craig answered evenly and without hesitation. The directness and candor of his response briefly halted the raised hands. They slowly rose, and Craig recognized another.

"Were you a religious man prior to your…cure?"

"Not particularly. I was raised a Catholic and stopped regularly attending church quite a while ago. Yes?"

"Has Elohim performed other miracles?"

"Again, the remaining speakers can cover their own experiences. I can tell you that simultaneous to my spine healing, I also lost approximately forty pounds, and four false teeth that had been in my mouth were gone and replaced with natural teeth. Yes?"

"You lost forty pounds and four real teeth regrew, and you didn't notice any of this until he pinched you?"

"To understand, you would need to have lived in a wheelchair. Paralysis and the accompanying bodily conditions that arise have the effect of making you ignore your body. You're not getting any feedback from a large part of it, anyway. And the overall condition that you're in is…depressing. To maintain your attitude…there is a tendency to focus on the surroundings rather than yourself. There have been documented stories of people with my…former…condition having significant events happen to their bodies and not noticing.

“I know there are additional questions. However, to keep this moving, I’m going to bring up Walter Penfield. As Margo mentioned, we will all be available for questions at the end. Walter.”

Penfield looked uncomfortable as he approached the podium. Thanking Craig, he addressed the reporters, “Good afternoon. I was asked by Ms. Jackson and Dr. Johnson to approach as a scientist my interview with Elohim. And I did that. The discussions that we had were profoundly fascinating from the point of view of both physics and mathematics. Unfortunately, due to the limited time, I have not been able to perform either the calculations or the experiments necessary to validate any of Elohim’s theories. I can tell you that, if His theories prove to be correct, there would be a change in both fields that would be revolutionary…a new paradigm would come into existence which would forever alter our view of the universe, Earth, and life. The specifics of His theories, or from His perspective – explanations, are contained in your handout. I cannot, as a scientist, authenticate Elohim’s claim of being the Creator without completing months or perhaps years of work. And even then, I am not certain that the scientific method can be applied to this question.”

Penfield paused, seeming to gather some strength for what he was to say next. “On the other hand, as a person rather than a scientist…a person hopefully with the ability for critical thinking….” Walt paused again. “What I am struggling to say here…is that Elohim is something special, of that there can be no doubt. All of my training is woefully inadequate for the purpose of evaluating Him. I was asked by Ms. Jackson and Dr. Johnson to form an opinion as to whether Elohim is our Creator…I can’t do that. I can’t do it as a physicist…I can’t do it as a mathematician…I also cannot do it as a theologian, having no training in that discipline. What I can tell you….” As Penfield spoke, he looked directly into the camera lens that was feeding his image and words to the world. “As a man…just as a man…I do believe that we have God in our midst and that Elohim is that being.”

Rather than asking for questions, Penfield turned and walked back to the table, seating himself between Reese and Elohim. Reese, caught off guard by Penfield’s sudden departure from the podium, quickly gathered his papers and strode to the front.

“Good day. As most of you know, I am no stranger to controversy. Because of that, I was surprised when I was invited to interview Elohim. I felt that the attention I had received in the past would have a negative impact on my credibility. As result of this concern, I have attempted to remain even more objective during this process. The claims made by Elohim are extraordinary. He has maintained that He is the being who created our universe…therefore implicitly stating that He is older than our universe. He also claims that although evolution, as taught by biologists, is real, it could not have produced mankind on its own, and that it was His hand which created man. Evolution is the mechanism He created as one of the tools which He has used in the continuing development of our species.

“He tells us that after the original creation of man, for the most part, He has maintained a hands-off policy, allowing mankind to progress on its own and stepping in only occasionally to fine-tune the progress. At one point in our distant history, concerned that we did not have sufficient genetic diversity to survive a mutated virus or other threat, He created variations of us, resulting in the races that we have today. One of the most certain to be controversial aspects of His description of our history is that all of the epochs from the beginnings of life on Earth, including the millions of years of the dinosaurs, were necessary stages to create a habitable environment for mankind. And as each stage fulfilled His purpose, He caused the mass extinctions that allowed the planet to support the next stage.”

Reese’s experience as a lecturer to frequently hostile students had prepped him to recognize the signs in the faces of many of the reporters. He knew that the group of speakers, especially Reese himself, were giving them far more than they would be able to swallow. The expressions of the audience members ran the gamut from incredulity to outrage.

“Some of what Elohim has told me dovetails into the traditional teachings of the Bible. There are many areas where, He maintains, the biblical descriptions are inaccurate, misunderstood, or greatly exaggerated. Some of His descriptions of history are more accurately reflected in the teachings of other religions or philosophies, including some descriptions and prophecies verbally handed down from peoples who have long disappeared from the Earth. One of these statements is that this is His third

visit, rather than His first, as foretold by the major Judeo-Christian religions.

"The purpose of His visit, according to Elohim and as Archbishop Coughlin mentioned in his public statement, is that this is a time of judgment…not Judgment Day as described in Revelation. There will be no global cataclysms. There will not be the great battles between good and evil…that is, as Elohim has warned, unless His presence triggers those events in mankind. He is simply here to judge us all and depart with the Chosen, as He calls them, to Heaven, leaving the rest behind.

"This departure will not take the form of the 'rapture' that has been popularized. Pilots will not disappear from flying airplanes…drivers will not be plucked from moving cars. And, of more importance to Elohim, the departure will be totally voluntary. There are many who will be chosen and will decide to stay. They will, of course, be allowed to stay, although staying may sacrifice their place in Heaven.

"He also tells us that Jesus is His Son. In this interim period between His visits, Elohim feared that mankind was moving in a direction that was away from His desired goal…away from the path that would lead us to become chosen. His Son, Jesus, offered to come to Earth to teach and set an example by which we could live, thereby helping all mankind to reach Heaven. According to Elohim, this intervention by Jesus helped many to find their way back to the path to Heaven.

"Interestingly, Elohim has described an afterlife of waiting. Those who have departed in the time since His previous visit must wait until His return to receive their judgment. While the many souls have waited, they have remained with us here on Earth. These souls cannot interact with us without the help of the living, either willingly or unknowingly. Elohim's description of this process is quite similar to much of the so-called New Age belief. The departed souls frequently utilize the five senses of the living to be able to participate vicariously in our lives. He describes this not as a possession but as a borrowing of or piggybacking onto our consciousness, most of the time without our knowledge…although, He says, the sensitive among us can perceive this happening within them or within others, and, in some cases, can even converse with the souls.

"Elohim has also stated that our environment is influenced by us…not just by our physical actions, but by our minds. It is a skill we all possess at birth, but it is discouraged as it begins to manifest, and then withers with disuse. This skill, if developed, would allow us to create matter out of apparently thin air. In fact, as Elohim has described, the universe is filled with energy packets similar to the quanta that Einstein described in theory. The veil between energy and matter is a thin barrier, and the mind is capable of altering the state of existence so that energy becomes matter and matter becomes energy. This description is, in fact, the ultimate extension of the famous equation $e=mc^2$. Elohim also tells us that this ability is restored to those who reach Heaven, and thus Heaven is constructed purely by the minds of the residents…which also explains the importance of only certain of us being invited. A person not of the same ilk and disposition as the others, but with this ability, could have a profoundly negative effect on the environment of all."

Reese paused, collecting his thoughts. His statements to this point had been prepared earlier. He was now at the end of his notes. The summary and conclusion had not come to him in time to be written. His plan was to "wing it." He began, "There were many other items of discussion over the last few days – far too many to relate today, all of which will be made available to you soon. Our government, faced with these unprecedented circumstances, as Margo mentioned earlier, asked me to authenticate Elohim, as well as His statements. As I stand here before you, I remain baffled and overwhelmed by that task. All that I have learned and observed in my lifetime seems grossly inadequate to perform this duty. If Elohim is, as He says, our Creator, it would be pure arrogance to assume that I could be qualified to *authenticate* Him. I am no more capable of doing that than a leaf on a tree is competent to authenticate the sun. Therefore, my decision has been to attempt to disprove His claims, to make the assumption that He is not as He states. If that were the case, proving it should fall within the realm of mortal ability. I can tell all of you today that I have failed…I have not found in any discussion, in which I've been a part, a single flaw or error in His statements or actions. I have not found a single reason to disbelieve

His statements. In my attempt to prove that Elohim is not our Creator, I have come up with *zero* evidence.

"That is what I report to you today…as a scholar…as an anthropologist…and as a psychologist. I suspect that one of the reasons I was chosen for this task was my experience with a cult. That experience taught me the dangers of succumbing to a charismatic figure. I suppose that it was assumed I would be immune to the influences of Elohim's personality. I can tell you that is impossible. No person who has met Him has not been profoundly affected by the meeting, and I am no exception.

"I will leave it to you…each of you…according to your own beliefs…to decide. Those of you who are certain that there is no God will not care about the outcome of this investigation…other than as another amusing example of the foolishness of the religious. Those of you who are a part of a philosophical or religious group which does not embrace the monotheistic God of the Jews, Christians, and many other faiths also will not be engaged in this controversy in a personal way. For the last group, those who, to varying degrees, do believe in a single God who created the Heavens and the Earth…who created man and woman…I can tell you that if any of you had been in my place for the last few days…you would conclude, as I have, that Elohim is that Creator."

Reese stared around the room at the reporters. He was not quite sure if they were stunned by the possibility that his position was true, or simply by the outrageousness of his statements. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Any questions?" Nearly every hand in the group was raised instantly. Reese picked one. "Yes?"

"How is Elohim proposing to notify each person of…of his decision?"

"Actually, I never discussed the actual mechanics of the…selection process. Do you have another question?"

"Yes, I do. You said earlier that objects can be materialized out of thin air. Could you give us more detail about that?"

"I can…somewhat. In my presence and that of Walter Penfield, Elohim caused to come into existence first a ball of what appeared to be carbon, which then changed to a ball that looked like steel, changing again to neon

gas, then water, then solid gold. The ball of gold has been tested and is authentic."

"So, anything can be created from…energy?"

"Yes, according to Elohim. Additional details are in the handout. Another question? Yes?"

"When is *Judgment Day*" – the sarcasm was obvious in the reporter's voice – "supposed to happen?"

"Elohim did not give me a specific day. I believe that He wants this public discussion to first run its course. Yes?"

"Did Elohim perform a miracle for you?"

"You mean other than materializing a solid ball of gold?" There was a slight titter in response to Reese's comment. "Yes. As a matter of fact, He did. Elohim presented me with a bound version of my first book, a book that I had destroyed upon its completion. He also shared knowledge with me of a personal nature that I would prefer to not discuss. Another question…yes?"

"Has Elohim been subjected to a medical exam? Is he physically the same as the rest of us?"

"Actually, I don't believe He has." Turning, Reese glanced at Margo, who shook her head. "Other than the obtaining of a DNA sample for comparison to various databases for ID purposes, no."

"What is the Catholic Church's official position on Elohim?"

"You'll have to ask them. Yes?"

"After those who are chosen leave, what happens to the…the rest of us?"

"According to Elohim, nothing. There is no biblical punishment or anything of that nature. Those who remain have the opportunity to redeem themselves in preparation for the next visit. From what He has described, the absence of the Chosen leaves quite a vacuum in society. How the remaining people choose to fill that vacuum is their choice. Another question…yes?"

A senior correspondent, who had been covering Washington, D.C. through the last six Presidents, stood and asked, "Do you feel as silly discussing these things as we all feel listening to them?"

Reese looked at her for quite some time before answering. Her smugness and self-righteous expression were very familiar to Reese, as was the condescending tone to her voice. “No, I don’t feel the least bit silly. Nor do I believe that you are accurate in your opinion that all of your colleagues feel as do you. Not all of them believe that there is nothing or no one above them. We live in a society which has elevated the iconoclast to an heroic stature. In the past there were some icons that deserved to be torn down – perhaps even today. What I believe has happened is that the pleasure of the demolishing of those icons has become self-perpetuating and has triggered an orgy of destruction for destruction’s sake, without any discrimination as to the value of the establishment, system, or belief that may be the target. Rather than celebrating excellence or superiority, we’ve made it a sin in the religion of secularism. To witness this…one need not look at the global or national level. Even enormously talented sports figures are scrutinized and hounded until flaws in their personalities can be found so that they are ‘brought down a notch or two’ by the media. It’s taught in the elementary schools. If, in a competitive sporting event, a team is beating the other by ‘too much,’ one of that team’s players is pulled off the field for each point it scores, until the match is even. Academically, the same thing is happening. Attend a high school commencement ceremony, and you will see the achievements of the superior students downplayed and the mediocre celebrated.

“All of this happens in order to make the mediocre ‘feel better.’ Rather than creating a pressure that pushes them to try harder…to work harder, as the success of the excellent is intended, the fad is to simply tear down the excellent…the icon. It is a fad that has continued for many years now. The press has pandered to this fad. The skills in this area have increased to the point that now we frequently see an incipient icon nipped in the bud, before he or she can even begin to make others feel bad about themselves.

“Rather than reporting events objectively, the press has appointed itself to be the institution of cynicism. I mentioned a moment ago that the iconoclast has become a hero of this class. If you think about it…that’s an oxymoron…the iconoclast becoming an icon. So, this must be a difficult

situation for some of you today. Because…before you is, potentially, the ultimate icon."

Reese stopped himself from his rant, taking a deep breath. The reporter who asked her question was still standing, her eyes glazed over. Reese said, "I am sorry for my…tendency to revert to lecture mode. To answer your question…no, I don't feel silly at all. Next question, please?"

At the moment, no hands were raised. Reese took the opportunity to close the questions, saying, "Unless Rabbi Schmidt has any comments…." Reese looked at Leo Schmidt, who nodded. "Apparently he does. Rabbi Schmidt?"

Leo replaced Reese at the front, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the lectern. In a soft, almost conversational voice, he began, "I wasn't planning on speaking today. You see, when Margo Jackson asked me to participate in this, I was certain that it was a waste of time and an insult to the faith of my fellow Jews. The Talmudic teachings tell us that several conditions must be met prior to the arrival of God on Earth: all of the tribes of Jews must be reunited in Israel; all of Israel's enemies must be defeated; the third Jewish Temple of Jerusalem will be built with services resumed; and the dead shall be revived. Upon arrival the Messiah will become the King of Israel, dividing the Jews into their original tribal lands. As the Messiah reigns, Israel will be attacked by Gog, the King of MaGog. This will be the battle of Armageddon. Not only will God vanquish this final enemy, but he also will banish all evil from human existence. Following this battle there will be a thousand years of peace, tranquility, holiness, spiritual life – a time called Olam Haba, which means 'future world.' Each and every person on Earth will know God directly.

"These are the beliefs of my people, and these are my beliefs down to the core of my soul. So, as I traveled to my meeting this morning, my head was filled with these thoughts. All of the Jews were obviously not in Israel…even if all of them had sneaked there during the night, I was still in America, and God wouldn't start without *me*."

There was mild laughter in the room from the reporters, as well as from those at the front table. Schmidt went on, "I read the morning paper with my coffee to see if Israel's enemies were still alive and well. Yes, I actually

checked. I even turned on the cable news to make sure that they hadn't all been wiped out after the newspaper deadline." Another murmur of laughter spread.

"I then called a friend of mine who lives in Jerusalem and asked him if the mosque had been torn down and if our third temple had been built recently. I won't repeat his response verbatim; however, suffice it to say, there still aren't any services being held there for Jews.

"Israel still does not have a King…again, I checked. And I must confess that I don't know who Gog is. Nor do I know where to find the kingdom of MaGog. However, to the best of my knowledge, there haven't been any attacks on Israel originating from there.

"Needless to say, after doing my research this morning, I had made up my mind. After all, my God wouldn't lie to me. He told me many years ago that these conditions would be met before and during His Coming. He also told me that any man who claimed to be the Messiah – if these conditions hadn't been met – must be a fraud.

"And, as I said, my God doesn't lie.

"So, that was it. No interpretation was necessary…no analysis required…no decision to be made. In fact, someone of my obvious stature was not even required for this task. This interview could be performed by a reform rabbi." Again, the reporters laughed.

Leo's eyebrows lowered slightly, his face softening. In an even quieter voice, he said, "Then I met Him." The Rabbi took a long, slow breath and let it out equally as slowly. He asked the reporters, "Has this ever happened to you? You meet a wonderful man or woman. You marry. You have a family together. You are happy with your life. And then suddenly, without warning, you meet another who gives you that funny tingling feeling in your stomach, who makes you laugh, and who makes you think. That person brings out feelings that are fresh and exciting. You love your wife… or husband…and you will never leave. You will stay together until your dying day, and you will be happy. But there will be times when you will wonder 'What if…what if I had married this other?'"

Turning to face Elohim, Schmidt said, "I will not stand before all of you and say that this is my God…my Creator. I've already explained that I

cannot." Pausing for a long moment, staring into Elohim's eyes, Leo said, "What I can say to all of you is that if I wasn't already married to my God…Elohim would be a wonderful choice."

Schmidt did not invite questions. He returned to his seat. Margo Jackson nearly leaped up from hers and hurried to the podium. "Thank you, Rabbi Schmidt." Turning to face the front table, she simply said, "Elohim?"

The room was silent as he rose and walked up. Reese carefully watched the reporters' faces as they tracked Elohim. The expressions ran the gamut from reverence to disdain and disbelief. Reese decided to watch the reporter who had asked the question resulting in his earlier tirade. As Elohim moved to the front, her expression mirrored that of a rape victim watching her attacker take the witness stand.

Rather than using the lectern, Elohim walked in front of it, eliminating any barrier between himself and the reporters. The room was so silent that Reese heard the slight whirring sound of the television cameras changing focus settings.

Ignoring the cameras, Elohim addressed the reporters. "Greetings, my children. I must first say that I am sorry for the distress and discomfort that my arrival and presence have caused both here in this gathering as well as throughout the world. Earth was created only to be a home for mankind, and mankind was placed upon this Earth only to earn passage into Heaven. Were this not the case…mankind would not exist. Although that has always been the purpose…I have witnessed, twice before, the tumult that arises as a result of the fulfillment of this purpose. Tumult and chaos are not what I wish for my children. Nor are anger…pain…and fear.

"There are some among you, sadly far too few, who may rejoice at this time because you stand on the verge of a journey to Heaven. Your hearts, your minds, and your souls have embraced the basic precepts needed to earn this right. There are many others among you, far too many, who have chosen a different path. You have chosen to place yourselves above your mothers and fathers…your husbands or wives…your own children. You have chosen to place yourselves above the people of your town…the people of your country…and the people of your world. And you have chosen to place yourselves above me.

“Although I have come to judge, I do not condemn those who will remain. All of you have truly been created with free will.” Gesturing back toward the group at the front table, Elohim said, “Some who have talked with me these few days have asked me why I have not interfered more with the course of human events both on the large scale as well as on the personal and private. My answer has been that each of you receives the gift of life, and you are measured by what you do with that gift. I cannot measure if I tamper. That is not the purpose of Earth…of this trial. Those who come to Heaven will never want for anything. You will but ask and shall receive. Were I to do this for those on Earth, there could be no test… no trial of character.

“Free will is yours. If you choose to walk the path to Heaven, you will be rewarded with an eternity of grace and bliss. If you have made the choice that Heaven is not your goal, so be it. I will only offer…I will not compel. All of you who have made that choice will remain on Earth. Perhaps your lives will be even better than before because you will be unencumbered by those who have departed with me. All that I ask of you is that there be no recriminations. If you are not of the Chosen…it is a result of choices that *you* have made throughout your lifetime, regardless of your status in society. Some of the Chosen have been quite poor…but only in the material. Your hearts, minds, and souls are rich beyond description. Some of the Chosen have been wealthy…yet your wealth extended beyond the material and also encompassed your very being. Among the Chosen are members of each race and each religion. This must be so…if choice is all that matters. If you believe that you should be of the Chosen and find that you are not, I ask that you blame no one, other than yourself, because no single person on Earth has faced an unfair test.”

Reese watched the reporter. Her expression, hostile at the beginning, became worse as she listened, suffused with anger and outrage as Elohim spoke.

“I know that many of you are curious as to how judgment will occur. Rest easy that it already has. Each and every person on Earth shall know – now – whether he or she is of the Chosen. If you are, you will find a mark on the palm of your right hand.”

Reese, since he had been told directly by Elohim, felt no need to look immediately at his own palm. Instead, he watched the reporters as nearly all of them turned their right hands palm-up to check. After looking at their own hands, they also glanced at the palms of their colleagues. By their faces, Reese deduced who had a mark and who did not. Some showed disappointment, some anger, and some nonchalance, having not expected all this to be real. Only one of the reporters apparently had the mark. He sat staring at his palm, smiling. His pencil dropping made a loud clatter in the quiet room. First, those on either side of him looked and saw the mark; then, others craned around to catch a glimpse.

Elohim continued, "The mark shall be my name in its ancient form. For you who unfortunately have lost your right hand at some point in your life, do not despair…you will find the mark elsewhere on your person. For you who do not have the mark, please remember that it is intended only to inform each of the Chosen of his or her reward. The mark itself is not a passage into Heaven. Therefore, attempting to replicate it upon your own hand will do nothing but make you a fool.

"I now must address the Chosen…." Elohim looked directly into the camera and continued to speak. "Each of you shall have five days from this day to decide. A few of you will discover that although you have been chosen, others you love have not been. For you, this is a truly heartbreaking condition. However, it is one in which you must choose once again. You will not go to Heaven against your will. You may decide to remain for whatever reason, and your wish will be honored. Should you choose to remain…after those choosing to leave have departed, your mark will be erased, and you will live with the others as one of the others. I must explain that if you choose to remain, you risk succumbing to that which you have, to this point, resisted. There is no promise that although once chosen you will eventually join me in Heaven. I have learned from two other visits that the world becomes a less pleasant place after my departure. Although you have been tested thus far, to remain means to be doubly tested, or more. Each of you has spent a lifetime trusting your heart, mind, and soul…do not doubt them now. Make this decision as you have made all other important

decisions in your life, and the choice will serve you well. Once you have decided…I will know."

Elohim stood motionless for a time. The others in the room were immobile, as well. After a few moments, he turned and walked back to the table, seating himself next to Reese. Watching Elohim's face, Reese saw the distant, focused look once again. For once, Reese believed that he finally understood it. Elohim was listening. Reese, realizing that he had not looked at his own palm, turned over his right hand and opened it. There, in the center of his palm, were four symbols that he did not recognize. Looking around the table, Reese noticed that everyone else had his or her hand open, looking for the symbols. Everyone, that is, except for Leo Schmidt.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Pope sat alone in his study, watching the television. As Elohim finished, he then turned off the set and clutched the hand-carved wooden box he had retrieved from the tomb. It had not been out of his reach since that moment.

א

Cardinal Bonavente watched Elohim's statement from Kerry Coughlin's office, accompanied by the staff of clerics as well as others who worked at the archdiocese. As Elohim mentioned the mark, the Cardinal looked at his own palm, seeing the symbols, and wept. Through the veil of his own tears, he noticed that two of the three priests in the room, upon checking their own palms, quickly clenched their hands into fists, while the third held open his hand in wonder.

As Elohim finished, the Cardinal asked all but the two to leave. When he was alone with them, he asked, "My sons, do you not bear the mark?"

Without speaking, both slowly unclenched their balled fists, showing blank palms. One of the two finally found his voice. "I'm sorry, Your Excellency."

Gazing at both of them sadly, the Cardinal said, "Our time for confession and repentance is past. Your fate is in the hands of our Lord."

The other began quietly, "Cardinal Bonavente, I shall leave the Church immediately."

Instantly angered, Mario said, "How dare you? Do you not think that there will be a Church in six days?"

"But I am unworthy."

"Of course you are. God has said as much. But your unworthiness only extends to Heaven. On Earth you are more than worthy to lead the flock. After the Chosen depart, who will remain to do so? You! And who better to show the others the way than one who has failed and learned from his mistakes? Saint Peter renounced Jesus thrice in His time of need. Yet he

went on to become the rock upon which our beloved Church was built. Your belief…your mission…should now be more clear than ever before."

Sighing, with a much calmed voice, the Cardinal continued, "As Elohim reminded us, it is you who must make the choice…both of you. Now go… go and ponder not your fate but your futures."

The two priests left the room.

א

William Stavros had called a meeting so that his staff could watch the statement together. Several were poised to leave shortly for a planned demonstration, hoping to be present for Elohim's departure and the ever-present camera crews. The cadre of demonstrators was in place and would react should Elohim emerge too quickly.

At Elohim's mention of the mark, all instinctively checked their palms, most snorting at the absurdity of the statement. When the statement ended, and the network cut to the backlog of commercials that had piled up during the long, live coverage, Stavros angrily punched the mute button and whirled to face the group. "This is outrageous! Those goddamn idiot journalists are sitting there with their thumbs up their asses! It looks like they're falling for this load of crap!"

Stavros' staff, accustomed to his outbursts, sat quietly and waited.

"We are so far behind the power curve on this, it stinks. They're calling all of the plays…they're running them…and we're sitting on the sidelines, wondering what the hell is happening. We *must* get control of the ball…and I'm not inclined to wait for a fumble!

"Has anybody found that cripple McWilliams yet?" Stavros looked around the table accusatorily. No one answered.

"Are you all brain dead? Am I alone in this room? Hello?"

Tom Gleason, having offended Stavros at the last meeting, decided to speak again. "Mr. Stavros, I'll ask once more. What if this is real?"

Stavros glared at Gleason for several seconds, before exploding, "Tom…what the hell's wrong with you? Have you taken too many billy clubs to the head? You and I both know there's no god! Why would you even ask that question?"

Instead of replying, Tom Gleason raised his right hand, palm forward for all to see the mark. William Stavros' eyes bulged forward, his veins nearly popping. His mouth and lips, working as if he were chewing something tough, and finally acquiescing to the conscious signals from his brain, spat, "GET OUT! GET OUT OF HERE NOW!"

א

Dexter Mills had decided to go home to watch the statement with his Nicole. As Elohim described the mark, he looked and was astonished to find it on his palm. Joy welling up within him, he turned to show his wife, seeing that she was staring at her own palm. Looking down, he saw that hers was blank. Before he could think, before he could close his right hand, she quickly turned and saw his mark, instantly bursting into tears. He grabbed her in an embrace, holding her tightly, and also sobbed.

א

Lynn Sheffield sat in the rental car, listening to Elohim on the radio. He had also checked and his palm was blank; yet, there was no discernible change in his demeanor as he made that discovery. The closest parking space that he could find had been five blocks from the State Department. Hearing the statement conclude, he decided to get moving since it was such a long walk. As he had listened to the broadcast, the time on the parking meter had run out. Sheffield noticed the flashing "expired" on the meter, shrugged, and walked away without dropping in any more coins.

א

Randy Osborn was in Boston for a meeting; otherwise, he would have been home with his family for the public statement. The hotel lobby did not have a television, so he went into the lounge, ordering a grapefruit juice and settling into a comfortable chair to watch the large-screen TV that was normally tuned to a sports network. At the table nearest him sat two men, both watching the various speakers who preceded Elohim, both in Randy's

opinion drinking heavily. When Elohim spoke, most of the room was quiet except for these two men who made snickering comments to each other throughout the statement. Near the end, as Elohim described the mark, Randy automatically looked at his palm, seeing the strange symbols that had not been there a moment before. He noticed the two men had gotten quiet, staring at their own palms. Almost unconsciously, Randy glanced over to see the palm of the nearest man; there was no mark.

Suddenly angered, the stranger aggressively asked, "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing, sorry."

Not satisfied with Randy's apology, the man came over and roughly grabbed his wrist, pulling him to his feet. Twisting his right hand over, he saw the symbols on his palm.

"You've got it, huh? I guess that makes you hot shit!"

Osborn noticed the cocktail waitress who had been serving both tables pull her cell phone off her belt, obviously calling security.

"I said…does that make you hot shit?"

"Look, buddy. I'm sorry I violated your privacy. I've already apologized. Let's just drop this."

"Don't 'buddy' me, you son of a bitch!" With that, the stranger swung, catching Osborn cleanly on the side of the jaw. Randy Osborn went down.

א

Kathy Crocker, news anchor for one of the networks, shook her hair slightly to enhance the loose and casual look she cultivated. Next to her was Barry Thorndike, the former full-timer whom the entirely under-thirty staff not-so-affectionately referred to as "the dinosaur," due to both his age and his forty-three years of experience with the network. Kathy suspected that the network saddled her with Thorndike whenever something big was happening, to lend some "gravitas" to the show. She resented him intensely. The producer counted down to one by retracting his fingers, and the red light on her camera came on. "We're back. Thank you for joining us for our recap and analysis of the…well….pretty amazing public statement that we

all just saw. I'm not quite sure what to make of it. They referred to the situation as 'unprecedented,' and I think that certainly sums it up. Barry, your thoughts?"

Thorndike looked as though she had awakened him. Blinking, he said, "Kathy, breaking stories like this one cause all of us to feel inadequate. Elohim was definitely charismatic, and the others seemed unanimous in their endorsement of him."

"Well," she interjected, "some of the endorsements were less than unqualified. Walter Penfield made it clear that his opinion was strictly personal and that scientifically, he was not willing to take a position."

"That's true, Kathy. However, he explained that position quite well. Such a limited time to perform the kind of scientific research needed to test Elohim's statements is insufficient, by several orders of magnitude. All of the comments aside, Elohim's announcement regarding the mark that would appear on the palms of some people, accompanied by the actualization of this statement, is obviously the news of the day."

Crocker always suspected that Barry deliberately paraded his vocabulary when sharing the desk with her, with the sole intent of making her look like an intellectual lightweight. She answered, smiling, "It certainly caused a lot of people, including me, to do a palm-check. So far, I haven't come across anyone with the symbols, have you?"

With much seriousness, he answered, "Normally, I would have called my wife during the break…in fact, that was my first thought. But, as you know, she passed away four years ago." A momentary sadness flitted across his face, replaced immediately by his somber, professional demeanor. "I did poll the production staff and found one person here with the mark. I then called my daughter. She also has the mark…as…" – he turned over his right hand for Crocker and the camera to see – "do I."

Kathy was startled for a moment by the revelation. As she stared at the four symbols clearly visible on his thin and wrinkled skin, she forgot about the millions of people watching as she said, "Well…isn't that special!"

ℵ

Across continents, reactions of the people able to view the public statement spanned the spectrum, from humility to joy to anger to hatred. Some were with their loved ones when the announcement was made and were immediately able to discover who, among their group, had received Elohim's invitation. Others were not, and telephone systems, both hard-wired and cellular, were overloaded with calls as many attempted to reach their sons, daughters, parents, grandparents, and close friends. Had there been any method for tracking such things, it would have been determined that the vast majority of the calls began with "Do you have it?" in all of the languages of the world.

א

Margo, Reese, Craig, Nicholas, Claire, Leo, and Elohim had moved from the pressroom in the State building back to the conference room. Clayton Dean had gone to his office to brief the President. Reaching the conference room, they found Bill Burke waiting.

"Bill! How are you?" Margo asked, obviously glad to see her boss.

"I'm good, Margo," he answered, smiling. "Actually, I'm very good." Burke shared a knowing smile with Elohim.

"What are you doing here? I mean, not that you're not welcome. You know what I mean."

"I wouldn't have missed this, Margo. I watched it here on TV. It went well."

Reese responded, "I'd say that was an understatement. I think our friend here blew them away," nodding to Elohim.

"More than you know," Bill answered. "After you went off the air, I kept watching. The news people are clueless. But the coverage is running the gamut from outright skepticism to reverence. They're still trying to figure out how you managed to set up the language thing."

Margo asked, "What language thing?"

"Margo, you must be out of the loop. I guess someone here prerecorded Elohim's statement in several languages and put it into the feed. It seems that people all around the world who watched the statement heard it in their

own tongue. The network translators who were handling all of your speeches noticed it immediately and just stopped translating."

Reese looked at Elohim questioningly. Elohim explained, "There was no prerecording."

Burke was speechless. Leo Schmidt elaborated, "Most of the other religions in the world believe that individuals are chosen as messengers by God…that He speaks only to them, and that they carry His message to the world. Jews believe that God would not be so inefficient. If He had something to say, He would speak to all rather than one."

Margo's cell phone rang. She answered it and spoke softly for a moment, then ended the connection. "Guys," she said to everyone, "there's something we need to see." Reaching out to the console in the center of the table, she tapped a button and turned on the flat-screen televisions centered on each of the four walls. Tapping another button, the pictures changed to one of the news networks. It was a live camera shot of the street in front of the State building.

Nicholas exclaimed, "It looks like Woodstock out there!"

The news anchor was commenting during the live shot, "They just keep coming. I have no idea how many are there at this time, but if you take a look at the aerial view…could we have the shot from the helicopter?" The view changed to an overhead from high above the buildings. "There it is. All of the streets leading to the State building are clogged. People have stopped trying to park legally, and are just getting out of their cars in the middle of the street. They're abandoning them…leaving them open…just getting out and starting to walk."

Everyone in the room sat transfixed. The reality that they were all within that building, which was currently being surrounded by a mass of humanity, made most of them feel slightly claustrophobic. As everyone watched, Bill Burke spoke softly to Elohim. "Could I have a moment of Your time?"

Elohim stood, and the two stepped out into the hallway, which was quiet since the staff were all congregated around the nearest television. Bill Burke said, "I just wanted to thank You. I tried talking to Beth…to explain…to tell

her I was sorry. She stopped me. She said she knew – not the details, I guess, but the gist. She knew all along."

"I know," said Elohim.

"I know You do. I just wanted to say that You have given me a gift. Beth and the children all have the mark…they'll all be going with You."

Elohim nodded.

Opening his right hand, Burke displayed his blank palm. "I know I won't be going with them. That's fine. I don't deserve to go…and they do. But…I wanted to thank You for the next five days. Now that Beth and I have talked…now that I've seen again how much she loves me…and I've rediscovered how much I've always loved her…it's wonderful. Every minute is wonderful. The secrets are gone…the walls are gone. There's nothing but love. And the next five days will be filled with…just us."

There were no tears in Burke's eyes. His happiness was sincere and profound. Elohim reached up and laid his hand against the side of Burke's face. In an overwhelming flash, Bill Burke's mind filled with images of a life that he had not lived, his life as it would have been had he never transgressed and had Elohim not come. In blazing succession, each day, each minute of the rest of his life, as it could have been, filled his mind, leaving vivid memories of the tastes and smells…the touches and sights and sounds…as if they were all real. In his mind, he lived a long and happy life with Beth. Their children grew and married and had children of their own. He and Beth grew old together, happily sharing each step…each stage as a team…as soulmates.

Elohim took his hand away from Burke's face, and the torrent stopped; yet, the memories were all still there, as real as his memories from before this moment. Starting to wobble, Bill reached out and steadied himself against the wall, his face painted with happiness and contentment. It took quite some time for him to find his voice, finally saying, "I want to thank You…thank You for that. I have something to carry with me after…after…."

"Yes, you do," said Elohim gently.

Taking a long, deep breath, Burke resolved, "We'd better get back in there."

As they entered the room, Margo called out, “Bill, look at this!”

He looked at the nearest screen and saw the aerial shot again. Not only were the sidewalk and steps in front of the building now filled with people, the street was, as well – as were all of the streets leading to the building. The crowd extended for blocks in all directions; and as the helicopter flew higher, they could see that people were still coming. The reporter’s voice-over explained that the fire and police departments had given up any attempt to control the mass of people and were organizing staging areas several blocks away, with portable medical facilities and riot gear, if they were to be needed.

Reynolds asked Elohim, “Is this a riot waiting to happen?”

Elohim shook his head and said, “These are the faithful…there will be no violence from them.”

Reese asked, “They’re all chosen?”

“No,” Elohim answered, “nearly all are not.”

“They’re not going with You…and this won’t be a violent crowd?” Craig asked.

“There are many good people…people who love their God…who will not go. In their hearts they understand. If they feel anger at all, it is anger toward themselves…for the decisions they made that caused them not to be chosen. Most of these people have attended their churches or temples their whole lives, out of love. It is their love for me that brings them here.”

“So much for the separation of church and state,” muttered Margo, switching to another channel. The four screens showed that another network had been successful in getting a crew to the entrance of the building.

The reporter, a young black man, was jammed in between people and clutched a microphone. “The crowd is amazingly subdued. I’ve covered gatherings of one-tenth or less this size and have been nearly afraid for my life. Everyone here is calm and orderly. There’s no pushing or crowding.” The reporter pressed his finger against his earbud and listened.

Reese commented, “Notice how no one in the crowd is ‘hamming’ for the camera?”

The reporter said, “I’m going to talk to some of the people here now.” Turning to the first person to his side, he asked, “Hello, sir. May I ask you

name?"

The interviewee was a thirty-something male, clean cut, wearing a suit and tie. "Dylan."

"His parents were hippies," Craig said softly.

"Dylan, why are you here today?"

"To see God." The young man delivered the phrase without either irony or exaggerated wonder…just in a very matter-of-fact manner.

"So you believe Elohim is God?"

"Yes, I do."

"Did you receive the…mark?"

"No," the man answered, showing his palm. "I didn't."

"How do you feel about that? Are you upset?"

"Not at all. I feel okay with it."

"Why?"

"My whole life I wondered if there really was a God. My parents took me to church for a while, then they stopped…."

"See, I told you they were hippies," Craig muttered.

"But I always wondered what everything was all about, why we were here and, you know…I guess, the meaning of life. Now I know."

The reporter would not let it drop. "But Elohim isn't taking you to Heaven."

"That's my fault. I did a lot of things I shouldn't have done. I was just too much into myself. I made my choices…I can live with that."

"I'll be going out there now," Elohim said.

The reporter turned to interview another person as Margo turned off the sound. "I don't think that's a good idea…sir. A crowd that size is a time bomb. There's no way we can maintain any kind of security."

"I'll not be requiring any security."

"Elohim…please."

He turned to Margo and explained, "Everything is fine, my child. This must be done. They…" – he gestured at the television – "have come to see me, and they deserve that." There was a finality to his voice that could not be dissuaded. Margo dropped back into her chair and sighed.

Reese said, “I’m feeling a little strange.”

Reynolds asked, “Why?”

“It’s done. I just realized that my part of this is over. I hadn’t given that a moment’s thought for the past three days, and it suddenly hit me.”

“Same here,” said Penfield. “I should be getting home to my wife. I really have a lot to do…in the next five days.”

The depth and breadth of Penfield’s words silenced everyone. Each of them pondered the future. Each who had the mark, unless he or she chose otherwise, would be departing this life for something new…something so different it was incomprehensible.

Claire was the first to speak. “Elohim, when we go…how does it happen? Do we die?”

Obviously, no one had considered the mechanics of the transition. Claire’s questions caused concern and fear to flicker across all of their faces.

“No, Claire. There is no need for your death. When it is time, the journey will be as a sleep with a wondrous dream. When the dream is complete, you will awake and be in your new home…you will be in Heaven.”

Claire and the others were reassured by his words, by his voice. Elohim continued, “Reese and Claire, I wish you to remain with me for these next five days – not simply because your presence is so well enjoyed, but because we have also begun many conversations that should be relayed to the others, to those who will stay behind. That task should be yours, Reese. I would like for you to prepare a detailed explanation of all that we have discussed…be it in writing or in your own voice. As you prepare it, you will have more questions…questions that should be answered.” Turning to Penfield, he said, “Walter, you may also stay if you like. If you prefer to go home, you can convey your additional questions to Reese. He will obtain whatever answers you may need.”

Penfield nodded.

Reese glanced at Claire questioningly. She nodded her assent and he answered, “We would be honored to remain with You.”

“Thank you,” said Elohim.

“Nicholas and Craig, unless you would prefer otherwise, I’d like you to stay with Elohim to provide whatever security coordination you can…,” Margo said as she glanced at the television. Remembering that her boss was present, she added, “If that’s all right with you, Bill.”

He smiled. “Margo, you’re in charge. I just stopped in briefly. I need to be getting back home.”

“So be it,” said Elohim. “I will be seeing my people now.”

They all quickly got to their feet. Penfield asked Bill Burke, “Is there any way out of here…through that mess?”

“Yeah, there are several that are probably okay. Stick with me, and I’ll show you.”

Turning to Elohim, Burke said, “I hope to see You again.” There was more meaning in this phrase than normally would be attached.

Elohim nodded and said, “You will, my son.”

Burke and Penfield exited first, followed by the rest of the group. Margo said to Elohim, “At least give me a few minutes to get a detail out front to clear the area a little.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Elohim answered, walking briskly toward the end of the hallway that led to the building entrance.

“Oh, crap,” Margo said as she, Reynolds, and McWilliams scurried to get in front of him, attempting to run some sort of interference. Reese, Claire, and Leo followed closely behind. As they left the hallway and walked through the large lobby, McWilliams, shouting orders, frantically motioned for several of the security police to join ranks around them. Looking through the glass doors, Reese could see the crowd waiting patiently. The mass of bodies seemed to stretch out behind those in front, to infinity.

Bracing himself to be mobbed, Nicholas pushed open the doors, barely in front of Elohim who had not at all slowed down. The expected outburst did not come. As the people in front saw Elohim, all conversation hushed, and they began dropping to their knees. Elohim strode to within two feet of the front of the crowd, and in a powerful voice said, “Do not kneel before me. All of my children are worthy to stand at my side.” The many who had kneeled began to rise, until all were standing…quietly…expectantly.

א

Bill Burke and Walter Penfield were making their way through a rear corridor as a security officer burst out through an office door excitedly. “Director Burke. Thank God.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve been trying to reach Agent Reynolds. I…he must not have his cell phone with him.”

Reading the name tag, Burke said impatiently, “Officer Delaney, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s such a mob out there…we’ve been going crazy trying to profile the crowd…running the face-recognition software.” The officer paused, catching his breath. “We got a hit. It’s a face that Agent Reynolds flagged recently.”

“Let me see it,” said Burke.

The officer whirled and went back into the security station. One wall was filled with monitors, each with a different view of the building exterior. The center screen, triple the size of the others, was used for a closer inspection of a selected view. On this screen was a close-up of Lynn Sheffield, who was standing approximately three or four people back from the front. The security officer sputtered, “We got a software hit…brought up the….” After some keystrokes, the main screen split into two views, the second view showing Sheffield as he spoke with Reynolds and McWilliams on the steps of the Hoover building.

“Anyway, we brought up the original. It’s obviously a match.”

“Does Reynolds’ tag of this guy give an explanation?”

“Protester…harassing Dr. Johnson…first in Tucson. Then he showed up here.”

Burke thought for a moment. “He’s probably just here today for the same reason. In a crowd that size, we’re bound to get just about everybody.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Then we saw this….”

After more keystrokes, the live image of Sheffield froze, then ran backward to a point where he had turned sideways to the camera. Delaney stopped the digital display and zoomed in for a close-up. Before he could speak, Bill Burke saw it. Tucked under Sheffield's coat was a gun. Turning on his heel, he ran for the door, yelling over his shoulder, "Get hold of someone up front…anyone! Get Elohim back inside!"

Burke ran the length of the hallway in seconds, sliding around the corner toward the direction of the front of the building. He reached for his pistol and remembered that he had left it at home.

א

"I hear each of your prayers. As you face every tribulation of your lives, as you turn to me, I am there at your side. Not to undo the deeds…not to stop the assaults upon you…that is not my way. I am with you to love you as a father and a mother love their only child."

Reese studied the faces of the congregated as they stared, entranced by Elohim and his words. He saw that Elohim had been right. Several of their hands were visible and were not marked, yet their eyes were adoring.

"I not only love you…I feel your love for me. It fills my very being with joy. I will soon depart, and at my departure many of you will remain. Remember, as you stay behind, my promise – my promise that I will…."

Suddenly, through the front of the crowd burst someone Reese did not immediately recognize. Tall and slender…red hair and a beard…Reese knew he should recognize him, but could not. The stranger shouted, "THIS IS A LIE! HE IS A FRAUD! HE ISN'T GOD BECAUSE THERE IS NO GOD!"

Reese suddenly remembered – Lynn Sheffield, the protester from Tucson. Reese noticed several things happening at once. Sheffield pulled a gun out of his jacket and aimed it at Elohim. There was a shout from behind, and Reese turned toward the source, seeing Bill Burke sprinting through the front doors. There were two tremendous reports as Sheffield fired his gun. Reese spun around, looking for Claire, who was standing directly behind Elohim. He saw the blossom of red spreading across her blouse and realized that she had been shot. Furious, he turned toward

Sheffield who was pointing his weapon directly at Reese's chest. Sheffield shouted, "YOU DID THIS! YOU'RE A PART OF THIS!"

Reese could see Sheffield's finger tighten on the trigger, and he braced himself for the inevitable impact. He felt, more than saw, a blur of motion at his side a moment before he heard the gun fire. Bill Burke, seeing what was about to happen, had plunged in front of Reese, taking the bullet in his chest, just inches from his heart, ripping his lungs apart. As Burke went down, Reynolds and McWilliams dashed around him, slamming into Sheffield. Reynolds, grabbing for control of the arm with the gun, twisted violently, wrenching the weapon from Sheffield's grip. As it clattered down the steps, exposed by the retreating crowd, Sheffield, pointing at the fallen figure of Elohim, screamed, "LOOK! HE'S DEAD! CAN GOD BE KILLED?"

Stunned, Reese looked at Elohim, who lay face down on the concrete, a large, gaping hole blasted out of his back. He ran to Claire, who was just starting to drop to her knees. Lowering her down and cradling her, he shouted to the security officers, "We need a paramedic here! Please hurry! We need a paramedic!"

Ignoring the pandemonium all around, Reese said, "Claire, baby…are you all right?" He gently stroked the side of her face.

Her eyelids fluttered for a moment before she focused on his face. "It hurts, honey," she said softly.

"I know," he answered, trying to soothe her. Reese saw Claire's gaze shift from his face to the space beside him.

"What's that light?" she asked, sounding frightened.

Panic struck him as he remembered the oft repeated descriptions of near-death experiences and the light. He turned to see a narrow shaft of bright, white light coming down from the sky. About the thickness of a pencil, it was so intense that he could not see through it. It was focused on a spot only two feet from Elohim's still body. The shaft gradually widened until it was nearly the width of a doorway. An apt description, Reese thought, as he saw the light dim to nothing, leaving within its former circumference a lone man with jet black hair and piercing eyes.

Everyone within sight of his arrival was stunned to silence and watched as he turned and knelt next to Reese and Claire. Reese stared at his face, not remembering a more beautiful countenance throughout his lifetime. With great care, the stranger placed his hand upon the bloody area of Claire's upper chest. Reese saw that she was staring directly into the stranger's eyes, and he was staring into hers. Moments later, she suddenly spasmed a single time, and he lifted his hand. Reese saw there was no blood on the fingers or palm.

As the man stood and turned away, Claire said, "Reese, honey! It doesn't hurt. The pain's gone!"

Astonished, Reese pulled the top of her blouse down a little and, instead of seeing a wound, saw her smooth, pale skin. Even the blood was not there.

Next the stranger turned and walked to Sheffield, who was still restrained by both Reynolds and McWilliams. No longer struggling and defiant, Sheffield's expression was one of a cornered mouse watching a snake approach. Reese noticed that no one made a sound; only the breathing of those nearby could be heard. Claire, propping herself up slightly, whispered to Reese, "An angel!"

The angel, if that was what he was, stepped directly in front of Sheffield and cupped his face with both hands. The grip was neither firm nor rough as he stared into Sheffield's face. As they gazed intensely into each other's eyes, Sheffield's expression changed. What began as fear became a look of understanding, followed by an expression that could only be described as deep despair. As his body went limp, a yellow, misty cloud emerged from the top of Sheffield's head. Not precisely a mist but more like the energy field that Penfield and Reese saw captured within Elohim's hands, it emanated from the top of Sheffield's body until, apparently, it had all escaped. The stranger released Sheffield's face, then reached up so that his arms encompassed all of the energy, bringing it down to him. He slowly squeezed his arms together, compressing the field. As it grew smaller, the light from it grew more intense until, as it reached the size of a child's ball, the brightness was nearly blinding to all. The stranger continued to compress it until his hands were together, as if holding a captured fly. The

light seeped out from between his fingers and the edges of his hands. He then tilted his head back and unleashed a powerful roar which reverberated from the nearest buildings…and with great effort, muscles tensed and bulging, smashed together his hands, extinguishing the light.

He relaxed his grip, then turned to Bill Burke who lay before him on the walk. Reese was surprised to see that Burke was still alive, considering the large pool of blood that surrounded him. Burke's eyes followed the angel as he approached. Then the stranger stopped, paused momentarily and turned to Elohim instead. Expecting to see distress at this change of plans, Reese saw a slight smile play across Burke's face.

His footsteps echoing off the walls and columns as he walked, the stranger knelt next to Elohim and bent over, leaning so that his body covered all of Elohim's torso. Embracing the still form, he kissed the back of his head. Those nearest Elohim gasped as they saw his hand move. The stranger rose and stepped back as Elohim slowly got to his feet. Reese saw there was no longer a wound in either his chest or his back. Elohim smiled at the stranger and raised his hand to his mouth, with his index finger touching his lips. The other man responded with the same gesture, and the column of light once again appeared, enveloping the angel.

Elohim did not wait for the column to fade as he turned and knelt next to Bill Burke. "My son," he said comfortingly, "your pain is over."

Burke smiled weakly and said, "I should have known that You didn't need my help."

With a single, gentle touch from Elohim on Burke's chest, the bleeding stopped. Soon, color returned to his face, and his breathing became normal. Elohim reached behind Burke, supporting him at the shoulders, and said, "Stand up, my son."

Another gasp came from the watchers as Bill Burke stood up. Softly, Elohim said, "It was not I whom you tried to save. It was obviously too late for that. It was the others…the others who were to go to Heaven soon. You intended to trade your whole lifetime to give someone else only five more days."

"It was just…."

Elohim reached up and touched Burke's lips, stopping him. "Say nothing, my child. You must go. You must be with your family." Elohim gestured toward the television crew who had captured the entire event, and said, "Your family has seen this. They are worried. They need you."

Burke looked at Elohim, wanting to say so much, instead saying nothing. As he turned and walked toward the building, Reese grabbed his arm, stopping him. "Bill, wait."

"Reese, I just had this conversation with Elohim. Don't worry about it."

"Bill…that's not it. Look!"

Reese was still holding Burke's arm. He twisted it so that Burke's right palm showed. There, where it had not been before, was the mark.

As if broken from a trance, some of the crowd, who were closest to the front, murmured, "Elohim," and began to cautiously walk forward toward him. The mass of people from behind followed, also trying to get closer. Elohim turned to the throng and took a step in that direction. Encouraged by this, more people continued to come until they had streamed onto the top steps, gently engulfing him.

The first of the crowd to reach Elohim timidly touched him. They instantly felt the surge of emotions, pain, or profound insights that contact with him produced. Yet, no matter which sensation flooded them, they were also embraced by his overwhelming love. Those farther back, unable to reach him, pushed forward, discovering that the effect of his touch passed through the inner circle and reached them, as well. A chorus of voices, filled with expressions of joy and happiness, coursed through the assembly.

Having turned a limp and distracted Sheffield over to the Capitol Police, Reynolds and McWilliams joined Reese, Claire, Burke, Margo, and Leo. They stood grouped tightly together and watched as Elohim continued to push himself deeper into the crowd, arms outstretched above their heads, allowing all to touch him. From their vantage point, they could see over the several blocks which were filled with the faithful. The effect caused by Elohim, a sensation that rippled through the mass of people, was clearly visible as those who had congregated began to bunch together to close the contact…creating a human conduit to convey his force to the farthest back.

No one was injured, no one trampled. There was no unruliness among all of the tens of thousands of people. As they all clumped together to create a single, vibrant organism, they cared for their neighbors, helping those who were old or lame…making certain that no one fell to the ground…knowing somehow that there was more than enough of Elohim to go around…more than enough for all of the people on Earth.

Reynolds, who had not yet felt the wonder of Elohim's touch, said, "Why are we all standing here?" and walked down the steps to the fringe of the group, reaching forward and placing his hands on the shoulders of the first person he reached. Following his cue, the rest slowly descended to do the same.

א

Marie Richardson sat on the floor of her living room just outside London, staring transfixed at the television. She and her parents had watched the entire coverage and were now speechless. They watched silently as Elohim walked deeper into the mass, completely surrounded by his faithful, all reaching to come in contact with him. Not knowing why, Marie reached out and touched the screen. "Mother! Father!" was all she shouted as she hurriedly pressed her other hand to it, as well. Curious, her parents came to the set and also touched it. The same force, which pulsed through those present at the gathering, reached through the air and across the continents to embrace the three of them. Millions of others, watching the live coverage throughout the world, discovered the same phenomenon.

א

Sister Mary George, working as a missionary in a small village in Brazil, watched her battery-powered television. The satellite dish, fastened to the top of a nearby tree, brought the rest of the world in for her, and she now watched the live camera feeds from the State Department in Washington, D.C. She also had laid her hands upon the set…without knowing why…and made the same discovery as the others. Wanting the villagers to feel the power of God's love, she pulled herself away from the

set and ran outside, intending to bring them into her hut in small groups. Exiting, she was startled to find them all…what appeared to be the entire, small population of this enclave…lying prone on the bare earth. Fearing that something horrible had happened, she ran to the first of the villagers to rouse him. Bending, she grasped his shoulder and gently shook him. It was then that she saw he was smiling, pressing his face tightly against the soil. Taking her hand from him, she touched the earth and felt the same tingle that she experienced from the television. Slowly, she lowered herself onto the ground.

א

Suri Kaval watched the entire spectacle from his office…alone. He sat motionless during it all, showing no expression on his face. As Elohim mingled with the masses, Suri, with some curiosity, reached out and touched the television screen. Feeling the powerful sensation emanating from the set, he immediately jerked his hand away…vigorously rubbing it against his other.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Just as the planet seeks a new stasis after a shifting of the magnetic poles, mankind contended with the new reality of Elohim's arrival by performing millions of interrelated adjustments, some minute, some monumental. The changes were rapid…and as varied as the wildflowers in a meadow, the effect of each small change rippling outward and affecting others. Within minutes after the televised statement and the spontaneous assemblage, people began leaving their jobs, not even bothering to speak to their supervisors as they left, realizing that this event, this moment in time, was far more significant than any daily activity.

Most went home to their families. For those whose children had scattered to other towns and cities, calls were made or attempted, e-mails sent, plans created for a rapid reunion. The impact of the mass exodus of employees had yet to affect the airline reservation websites, and many people booked themselves or their loved ones on flights that would never depart. There were those who were separated or divorced from their wives or husbands and sought them out, yearning for the comfort and security of the former bond. Not all of these attempts had a positive result, yet several did.

Whether being one of the Chosen or not, it seemed that no one wanted to be alone. It was human nature to strike out, to seek a self-reliant existence only when one felt secure. Times of great change – whether they were wars, depressions, or natural disasters – triggered the herd instinct that had caused mankind to descend from the trees and band together millions of years ago.

After determining the status of their immediate families, people then became curious about the friends, acquaintances, and associates in their lives. The mark – or the absence thereof – engendered a cascade of emotions as people found out who were of the Chosen; however, amazingly, surprise was rare. It seemed that nearly all knew in their hearts whether they would and should bear the mark, and they instinctively knew who among them would or would not.

The reaction of the Chosen was, for the most part, one of serenity and pride. The exceptions were those chosen who now faced the decision necessitated by being with loved ones who were not. The first reaction of those unfortunates was to insist to their wives or husbands that they would stay behind, that they would remain with them. The non-chosen spouses, displaying the unmistakable absence of the mark, invariably understood the reasons they were not chosen. They felt an urge to disclose and explain the choices made and actions taken that had led to their disqualification. For some, the result of their confession was to dampen the urge of the chosen spouse to stay behind.

The serenity and pride exhibited by the Chosen seemed most akin to the attitudes of people who had received new, long-sought-after jobs, and still assiduously labored with their soon-to-be-previous employers. The same character and discipline, which helped them to be chosen, dictated that they fulfill their obligations here on Earth for their last five days. And so it was that the Chosen, when first hearing the news from Elohim, did as all others and scurried to their homes and families; yet, it was also the Chosen who soon returned to their desks, their trucks, their counters, their routes. They knew the importance of their contributions and were aware that they had only five days to help their colleagues and employers fill the impending void. They would assist in the transition honorably.

If the non-chosen had possessed the same character and honor, their status might have been different on this day.

א

Margo Jackson sat in Clayton Dean's office, waiting for him to finish his call to the President. She had come directly from Elohim's greeting to the masses, thinking that it might be necessary for the government to react quickly to the unfolding of the recent events. Although not yet knowing what exactly might compel it, she knew the FBI would certainly be a part of that reaction.

It was impossible to ignore Dean's side of the conversation, which was fairly insubstantial, mostly consisting of "Yes, sir" and "No problem." He

held the handset tightly with his right hand so Margo could not yet tell if he had the mark. Hanging up, he turned to her. “Quite a day, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“What’s the status of the would-be assassin?”

“We’ve got him in lockup right now. He seems almost drugged. I don’t know what that…Claire Johnson called him an angel…took from him, but I suspect that someone who had a frontal lobotomy would have more spark.”

“Have you had a chance to discuss any of this with Elohim?”

“Briefly. I asked Him…I don’t remember how I phrased it…but, basically, I asked Him what He would like us to do with Sheffield. His answer was that we could do what we wished with what was left. The Sheffield who pulled the trigger was already gone…forever. I believe the word He used was *removed*.”

Clayton, unsure how to respond, stared at Margo. Finding words, he said, “His spirit, I guess.”

“I remember Elohim telling Reese early on that some of us are irredeemable and that after judgment those people are just ‘gone.’ Their molds are broken. They lose their souls. *They cease to exist.* I believe that’s the case with our Mr. Sheffield.”

“Well, I’m sure that we’ll still deal with, as you put it, ‘what’s left’ in our usual fashion.”

“Yep. He’ll be arraigned, tried, convicted, and tossed into a penitentiary. I guess the charge will be attempted murder…murders. Probably need to keep him in solitary. I don’t think the other cons will be too gentle with someone who tried to kill God. But it just kind of feels like we’re wailing on a carcass. The punishment has already happened.”

Dean, remembering the image of the angel as he saw it on the television, and the colossal energy exerted to smash Sheffield’s spirit out of existence, said, “Yeah, I think it has!”

“Clay, are we getting any feedback from other countries yet?”

“You know, it’s surprisingly quiet. I think that they are all so accustomed to giving canned responses, whether they be positive or negative, that they’re at a loss. This is not a time for standard responses.”

“I was thinking, politically, that this reminds me of a situation years ago when I was an agent in Seattle. Reagan, when he was President, visited the field office, and we were all gathered to meet him. He questioned us about a case we were working on at the time…a serial killer…and we started out giving him this formal recap. Pretty soon he cut through the crap and was quizzing us about details, procedures, that sort of thing. Boy, he really put us all at ease. About halfway through the discussion, I realized a couple of things. First, I saw that he wasn’t the doddering, intellectual lightweight the press portrayed. His grasp of the details and the nuances of the case was quick and incisive. He even made a few suggestions for us to pursue that were right on; no one had thought of them before. The second thing I noticed was that the chain of command had just dissolved in his presence. The lowest ranking agents were chatting directly with him, taking his advice, answering his questions, without even a glance toward their immediate supervisors. And when he spoke, when he suggested an action or avenue, we just agreed to follow up on it…directly to him.

“When he and his entourage left, the bureau chief just looked at us all and said, ‘Okay, you all know what to do,’ and we all split. It was obvious that he felt it would be out of place to restate or countermand any of the things our President had told us.”

Clayton added, “In a situation like that, you’re not even sure you’ll be listened to by your people after they’ve heard from the boss. I see your point…none of the leaders out there want to test their power with Elohim present. It’s a no-win situation. Elohim’s leaving in five days, and they’re all hoping the status quo will return. If they test him now, and if their people just disregard them…that defiance will remain in the minds of the masses after Elohim is gone.”

“Planting the seeds for future rebellion.”

“You know…sitting here thinking about this…it’s kind of a revelation. When we all studied history and learned about how various governments coped with religion, God was an abstract concept. I’m not saying that no one believed in Him; apparently many did. But leaders, being the power-hungry beings that they are, obviously couldn’t tolerate their people having a split allegiance.”

"No, that's true. So, some of the leaders co-opted God."

"Co-opted…hell, some claimed to be God, or the direct descendant. It was the only way they could gain the loyalty that mankind reserved for God."

"And some of them outlawed God."

"Yes, and that didn't work out very well. If you try to push religion underground, it seems to strengthen."

"Other rulers created their own religions, making observance mandatory, as an attempt to divide and conquer." Dean, reflecting for a moment, added, "It's funny if you think about it. The secularists have been shouting for years that man created God, that God has been the flag under which countries have marched, that religion was a tool of the despot to keep everyone in line – when, in fact, the reverse has been true. The stubborn desire to believe in God and in His laws, placing those laws above the laws created by any ruler, has been a stumbling block for all the nasty dictators there have ever been. Even after all their enemies have been defeated, they still had to kowtow to the religious, and those who didn't…failed."

Margo sighed deeply and slowly, saying, "And now He is here. And He is reasserting His…what…power?"

"His existence! That's the point I was starting to make. Governments can only deny religion, manipulate religion for their own purposes, create competing religions, and tout leaders who claim to be a son of God if He isn't around. And the longer He *was* gone…the more they all whittled away at everyone's belief. I mean…think about it. The scientists have screamed for years that there was no physical proof there was a God, that engaging in the God delusion was a mental defect. They even showed us MRI images of the specific region of the brain that was malfunctioning and causing this craziness. Over the centuries, the belief in God survived threats of execution, persecution, exile, imprisonment, ostracism, and ridicule…all without a single shred of reinforcement from Him. No wonder, in the college-level history classes, we all talked about religion as this quaint superstition that governments had to compete with for the hearts and minds of their citizens."

"Reese says we were brainwashed."

"He's right. We all thought we were so cool, so enlightened. We weren't going to be the slaves of some oppressive dogma; we were going to rise above all of that. And what did this so-called enlightenment get us? Without God we've got nothing left but our own selves. Women and men are getting more plastic surgery than ever. We go to all-day health spas. We drop our children off from morning till night at day-care centers so we can pursue our dreams. It's all just narcissism."

"Narcissism without any personal responsibility," Margo added.

"You're right. In fact…it's almost as if, in our own minds, we've replaced God with *ourselves*. How else can you explain suing McDonald's because you spilled scalding coffee on yourself? That's like a child's view of being God…punishing all those who displease you. Well, personal responsibility was suddenly reintroduced today. Elohim made it clear: there is no one to blame but yourself if you're not going to Heaven. It doesn't matter whether you were born wealthy or dirt poor…your color doesn't matter…gender…just your choices! Boy, that must be driving some people crazy right now. You can't claim to be a victim of your own choices."

"They'll find a way. They'll say that they would have made different choices if they had better parents."

"Or if we had only given more money to teachers!"

"More nutritious lunches."

Clayton stared thoughtfully at the wall behind Margo, saying, "But deep down, we know that's not true. It really has been about our choices."

Margo, sensing the change in his voice asked, "We? Our?"

Without speaking, Clayton uncurled the fingers on his right hand, displaying his blank palm.

Before Margo could think of a response, there was a soft "beep" from Dean's desk. Reaching over, he punched the button. "Yes, Francine."

"We just received something from the NSA office; they want you to see it right away."

"Bring it in."

A moment later the door opened, and Clayton's secretary entered with an envelope, handing it to him. As she exited, pulling the door closed

behind her, he ripped off the seal and dumped the contents on his desk, a single sheet of paper and a DVD. He read the paper.

"NSA just picked this up from Al Jazeera. It seems our friend Mohammed has made a statement."

Dean slid the DVD into a player and turned on the ubiquitous TV that every government office seemed to have. Nearly immediately, the familiar face of America's infamous enemy appeared on the screen. As usual, he spoke while sitting before a gray cloth so that no indication of his whereabouts would be visible in the picture. An NSA linguist had typed the English translation at the bottom of the screen as he spoke:

"Blessing to Allah. Today the infidels of the Great Satan United States exposed themselves as never before. They have put before us a man who claims to be God. They tell us that this evil being can heal the sick and bring back the dead. These surely are lies…only Allah can do these things, and if Allah had come to Earth, would He have chosen to arrive in the cesspool that is the United States? No. He would have come to His people.

"There can be only two explanations. The first is that this is nothing but another trick from the infidels of the Great Satan to attempt to sway the world over to their side and to cause some of the faithful to doubt the Prophet. They have used their electronic wizardry to create this fantasy, just as they do with all of the sinful movies they create. They are fools, and this will never happen. The world is wiser than the United States and will see through this ruse. The faithful will not doubt. The words of the Prophet burn like a fire within our hearts, and that fire devours all doubt. The second explanation is that the infidels of this evil land called America, who have descended into the pit of sin with their hedonism, have finally summoned the evil one – Satan himself – to assist them and to rule them.

"They have not been able to harm us with their rifles and bombs. They will not harm us now. We will show them…and the world…that just as we have already defeated the United States…with Allah riding with us…we will also defeat Satan himself. They must be punished for this blasphemy."

The translation continued as he finished his speech with the mandatory blessings. Dean turned to Margo and said, “I was wondering what direction he would go on this.”

“Now we know.”

א

Kathy Crocker sat at her twelve-foot-long teak desk, elbows resting on the edge, as she stared at her palm. “How can this be?” she said aloud, although alone. Throughout her career she had faced challenges and travails. The entertainment magazines covered it all – the loss of her husband, and two years after that, the drug overdose of their only child. Yet, she thought, she had pressed on through, shaking off the losses and redoubling her efforts to move up within the network. Especially after the death of her son, her ratings on the news feature “magazine” had skyrocketed. When the evening news anchor came up, she was the obvious choice.

And, she thought, she had faced everything with courage. *People* had put her on the cover – a picture, taken by one of the photographers invited to her son’s funeral, where she looked particularly grief stricken, with the caption “Courage Personified.”

“And Thorndike!” she blurted. “How in the hell could Barry Thorndike be going?” Crocker saw him as a weak simp, actually leaving the network high and dry for more than a year after his wife died. ‘He’s still milking it,’ she thought, ‘bringing up her death today and looking misty-eyed about it.’ Having a profound revelation, she realized, ‘That’s it. He’s jealous of me. He saw how I’ve moved up, and now he’s playing his wife’s death… thinking the sympathy will work for him, too.’

An electronic tone from the intercom interrupted her thoughts. “What?” she snapped.

“We’re coming back from the locals in three minutes, Ms. Crocker.”

“You don’t think I know that? I can read a clock,” she snapped again.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Crocker,” answered Justin, who was her twenty-year-old assistant and a former male model.

Getting up from her $4,300 ergonomic chair, custom designed to her torso, she rounded the desk and hurried through the door. Her office was just steps from the set and she was at her seat within thirty seconds, just in time for a makeup artist to toss a towel across her shoulders and begin applying powder to her cheeks to smooth the makeup creases she had created during the break.

Thorndike was already at his seat, listening to his earbud and staring at the various video feeds, trying to get a feel for what was happening around the country as well as the international locations that were being covered. She looked at his back balefully. 'What does he think he's doing,' she wondered, 'figuring it out himself? That's what writers and producers are for!'

The remaining time went quickly, and Kathy received the countdown. "Hello, again," she said perkily. "We're back and still struggling to get a handle on the impact of today's events as our nonstop coverage continues."

She turned to her side to face Thorndike because the TelePrompTer indicated the next lines were his.

"Kathy, in the wake of the spectacle on the steps of the State Department headquarters this afternoon, the Vatican has announced that the Pope will be making a public statement. It appears that the Pontiff will begin shortly. Until then, let's go to Cleo Dane, our Vatican correspondent. Cleo?"

Dane and her camera crew were set up in the square, which was brimming with people. "Thank you, Barry. As you can see, St. Peter's Square is packed to capacity with Catholics waiting for the Pope to appear on the balcony. The mood here is upbeat, and you can almost feel the anticipation."

Thorndike concealed his dismay at her comments. In the old school of journalism, you did not state something like "packed to capacity with Catholics" unless you had somehow actually determined that they were not all Lutherans. Her last sentence was also too subjective for his taste. If you wanted to convey "upbeat" and "anticipation," you did it with interviews or, at least, a good set of visuals, and then let the viewer decide. Instead of speaking these thoughts, he said, "Cleo, have you had an opportunity to

speak with any of the Pontiff's representatives? Do we have any solid information on the nature of his planned statement?" He deliberately inserted the word *solid* in an attempt to deflect any speculation her part. The millions of people watching were fairly wound up at this point. He was painfully aware of how a single misstatement could explode into severe unintended consequences.

"No, Barry, I haven't. We did see Cardinal Bonavente arrive here earlier today. As you know, the Cardinal and Archbishop Coughlin have been the only two representatives of the Church to meet with Elohim. I would assume…."

"Actually, Cleo, two priests who are members of the Archbishop's staff have also met with Elohim." Thorndike interrupted not to clarify this minor point, but rather to head off the "assuming" upon which she was about to embark. Shuffling through his papers, he added, "Here they are, Father James and Father McGonigle." When Barry Thorndike was rehired by the network to the position of, as he saw it, senior babysitter, he quickly developed the demeanor of a crotchety curmudgeon, realizing that it was this role which best allowed him the privilege of constantly interrupting and correcting the younger on-the-air personalities; he refused to call them reporters or, as they now preferred, journalists. He had long ago given up on their grammar, and now mainly focused on keeping them from committing the major sins of the trade.

Watching the monitor, he could see over Cleo's shoulder and noticed that several men were filing onto the balcony. "Cleo, it appears that the Pope may be coming out. We're going to cut to the press pool camera and sound feed now."

Looking over her shoulder at the procession, she swung back to the camera and said, "Okay, Barry."

As a concession to modernity, the Church had recently allowed a slender tower with a remote-operated camera to be erected in front of the balcony, as well as a single microphone to be positioned on the balcony itself. The microphone also fed the massive PA system that would fill the square with the Pope's voice. In a soft tone, Thorndike, not waiting for a

TelePrompTer's input and ignoring Crocker, began a soft voice-over of the balcony view.

"The Pope has not yet arrived. On the balcony is Cardinal Mario Bonavente as well as William Kent, an attaché bishop and special assistant to the Pope. Just coming out are the two priests I mentioned earlier, Fathers James and McGonigle. It is quite unusual for priests to be a part of the entourage. I would guess…and this is only a guess on my part…that they are included as a result of having met Elohim, a distinction that…from what we've been told…is not shared by the Pope himself."

"Barry," interrupted Crocker, obviously feeling a need to participate in the proceedings, "if you were the Pope today, what would you say to all of the Catholics?"

Stifling an urge to point out the inanity of her question, Thorndike simply said, "I have no idea, Kathy…I believe, yes…it is. The Pope has come out. We will go to just the live feed now and refrain from further commentary until he has completed his statement." Satisfied that his last statement would prevent Crocker from inserting comments during the Pope's statement, Thorndike sat back to watch the speech.

The Pope's face was unreadable. There was no apparent concern, nor was there happiness. In English, he addressed the gathering, paying no attention to the microphone or camera that recorded everything. "Peace be with you."

The microphone captured the audience murmuring, "And with your spirit."

"Today there walks among us a man who says that He is our Father… our Creator. Our Lord Jesus Christ told us that such a day would come…a day when His Father would come down from Heaven and give us His Blessings…a day when He would come down from Heaven and reward the faithful and the good, the gentle and the loving, the righteous and the pure.

"This man calls Himself Elohim…a most holy name. And in the short time that we have known this Elohim, He has performed wonders that cannot be explained…except by invoking the power of God. Even those of us across the oceans from Him have felt His love. We have seen Him heal

the lame, repair the damaged and…rise from death. We have seen His angel, and we have seen His wrath.

"Many have asked whether this man is the true God. We cannot provide you with an answer…for it is the realm of man to know only man…not God. What we must do is remain open to His Spirit and His love. The doors to both our minds and our hearts must be not ajar but flung wide so that He may come in. For if they are not…you may turn Him away. To turn Him away would be to turn away the light…and without the light, the soul withers.

"If you struggle…asking yourself if God is now among us…we ask you to ponder this. If He is not, if this man called Elohim is not our Father… you have only risked your pride…yet if He is among us, and you turn away…you are risking your eternal soul. It is for each of you to decide.

"Elohim has placed a mark on many of you today. The mark is the ancient holy name of our Father, as told to us in the Testament. To you with the mark…we have little to say. Your covenant is directly between you and God. We have great joy for the peace and serenity that bearing this mark has brought upon you.

"It is those without the mark who must be embraced. Elohim spoke and told each of you to blame no one for this choice…for the choice was not His…but yours. Each of you without the mark has been blessed…blessed with a second chance. There will be no great and horrible end to this place, no judgment today that would plunge many into the fires of hell. When Elohim departs in five days…taking the Chosen with Him…life on Earth will resume…and each of your lives will continue. We must all pray that although it may resume, it will not revert…revert back to the ways of last week, last month, or last year. For Elohim has promised one day to return… return to invite those who have been redeemed into an eternal life in Heaven. Just as your choices before this moment left you without the mark on this day, your choices from this day forth can lead back to the path to Heaven."

Gesturing to those behind him, he continued, "Cardinal Bonavente, Father James and Father McGonigle have been in the presence of Elohim. Cardinal Bonavente described the great love that he felt from Elohim, as

well as the great gift of joy that Elohim bestowed upon him. He also described the sweetness of His tears. It is our devout wish and desire to also meet with Elohim…if He so chooses."

Pausing, the leader of the Catholic Church looked out over the tens of thousands who had gathered for his words. Unclasping his hands, he raised them to all and said, "Let us pray." The mark of Elohim was clearly emblazoned on his palm.

א

Kaylie Willows stared intently into the mirror. She stood before it, modeling a new dress, and as her eyes followed the curves of her body highlighted by the thin, snug fabric, she felt the familiar upwelling of pleasure that normally accompanied this process. Glancing at her right palm for the twentieth time since she heard about Elohim's speech, she was again glad to see it bare. Her eyes moved up to her face, and she scrutinized it carefully, searching for any flaw in the makeup she had applied. After perhaps ten minutes of careful study, her hands moved up to her golden hair. Repeatedly, she scooped it up with her fingers and let it fall back onto her shoulders, continuing the procedure until satisfied that she had obtained the casual, neglected look she wanted.

Snatching up her purse, she hurried out the door and trotted down the steps from her apartment, crossing the grassy area to the parking lot. Pulling out car keys, she punched the button on the remote and saw the taillights flash on her six-month-old Maxima. As she did every time she drove the car, she resented her father for purchasing it instead of the Hummer she wanted. Sliding onto the driver's seat, Kaylie twisted the key in the ignition, and the car immediately came to life. Smiling wickedly, she twisted the key twice more, listening with satisfaction as the starter ground gears against the already running engine. "Come on, you piece of junk, crap out!" she said to herself. "The sooner you die, the sooner Kaylie gets another crack at Daddy."

Kaylie backed out of the space, bouncing the front wheel deliberately off the side curb. She gunned the engine and sped away, wondering who

would already be at Barton's. As she drove, Kaylie started calling her friends, trying to either line them up for an evening at the bar or find out their plans so she could change hers. Frustratingly, four of the five calls resulted in voice mail. Driving one-handed, she followed the voice mails she left by "texting" each of them. More than once, as she swerved out of her lane, angry drivers honked at her, only to get a raised finger in response. The successful fifth call was to "Sumo," a nickname with an origin that was a mystery to her, only to find that he was going to spend the evening with his parents. No amount of cajoling was to change his mind. "Dork!" she exclaimed, angrily punching the button to end the call.

The parking lot at Barton's, normally almost full at this time of the evening, was nearly empty. Putting her car in "park" but leaving the engine running, she scanned the parked cars and recognized none of them. Shifting into "drive," about to move on to another bar, Kaylie was suddenly startled by a loud knock on the window right next to her ear. Jerking her head to the left, she saw a stranger leaning down to look at her and smiling. He was old, she thought, at least thirty-five, but looked okay, kind of friendly. She lowered the window, and he immediately started talking. "I didn't mean to make you jump. I'm sorry. I just ran out of gas. With all this stuff going on today, I forgot about it completely. I was on my way home to my wife, when my car died." He rattled all of this out rapid-fire, while pointing to a car pulled just barely off the road and onto the Barton's lot.

"Anyway," he went on, "I wouldn't dream of asking you for a ride; you don't even know me. Could I pay you to buy a gallon of gas for me, and I'll wait here?"

Kaylie's first thought was not wanting her hands to smell like gasoline. She started to tell him that she was in a hurry and could not help him, when she noticed the mark on his palm. The stranger saw her eyes focusing on his hand and became self-conscious.

"You have it," she said, forcing herself to sound happy for him.

"Uh…yes, I do." Feeling a need to say something else, he added, "I was as surprised as all get-out."

She shifted her gaze from the symbols to his eyes. Staring into them, she made a decision. "Get in. I'll take you to a gas station."

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, sure! Get in.”

He trotted around to the passenger side, climbing into her car.

“My name is Ted, by the way…Ted Hornsby.”

“Good to meet you, Ted. I’m Kaylie.”

She slammed down the accelerator, and they sped away before he could fasten his shoulder harness. The first traffic light was red, and she stopped at the intersection. At the next corner was an actual service station with bays and lifts, rather than the usual convenience store with gas pumps. She pulled up to the front of the building. Ted immediately jumped out and began talking to the attendant. She saw the attendant grab a can and take it out to the pump, filling it. Ted paid and returned to her car.

“That was pretty quick,” she said.

“Well,” he replied, “I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than help me tonight. You look like you’re on the way to a date.”

“Actually, no date…no plans.”

Not sure what the appropriate response was, Ted said nothing. They made it back to his car in minutes. As he got out and thanked her, she said, “I think I’ll hang with you for a minute…make sure you get going okay.”

“No need, really.”

“It’s fine, Ted. Really. Like I said…I’ve got nowhere to go, anyway.”

She opened her door and walked with him to his car. He opened the gas door and unscrewed the cap. As he did, Kaylie leaned against the side of his car…right next to the tank and close to Ted. Feeling a little nervous, Ted took a half step away while trying to insert the can nozzle into the throat of the tank. As he pulled away, she slid closer until she was pressed against his arm, pretending to lean over to see the process. Neither said anything. The can emptied, and Ted, seeming relieved, pulled out the nozzle, setting the can on the ground. As he reached to screw the cap back, Kaylie placed her hand on his, stopping him.

“Uh…Kaylie…right? Kaylie, I need to be going…home.”

Still not speaking, she reached up and touched the side of his face, staring at him. He stared back. After a long moment, she leaned toward him, her lips slightly parted, closing her eyes. Expecting to feel her lips touch

his, she was startled when she felt him firmly grasp her shoulder, holding her away as he pulled his other hand out from under hers, the gas cap clattering to the pavement.

"Kaylie," he said firmly. "Thanks. Thank you again for the help…the ride."

He stepped back from her and the car, moving a few feet away. Instantly her eyes flashed. The contempt dripping from her voice, she asked, "You think you're special? Just because you have *that*…," gesturing toward the mark.

Not wanting a confrontation, Ted answered softly, "No…I don't. I just…I just…I love my wife."

Kaylie became instantly furious and shrieked, "YOUR WIFE…YOUR WIFE…I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT YOUR WIFE!"

Ted moved around to the driver's side, keeping the car between them. "Look, I don't know what's going on here, but I hope you didn't misunderstand. I just needed some gas."

Bending over, Kaylie picked up the gas cap and threw it at Ted, narrowly missing him. "You've got your gas, asshole! Get out of here!"

Needing no further incentive, Ted quickly got in, locking the car door behind him, and cranked the engine over until it caught. His obvious anxiousness to get away from her seemed to make Kaylie even angrier. As the engine roared to life, she was beating on the trunk with both fists, screaming, "Get out…get out…go to your damn Heaven, you sonofabitch!"

As he drove away, Ted saw her in his rearview mirror, still standing in the parking lot and screaming at him.

א

Dick Barton, the owner of Barton's, heard the yelling and went to check it out. He arrived in time to see a car pulling out in a cloud of burnt rubber and a young, blond girl he recognized as a regular, standing and shouting at the retreating car. Before he could go out to ask her the problem, she got into her car and also sped away. Watching the receding taillights, he shrugged and returned to the front door where he had a box of black vinyl letters for his marquee.

There was only one person inside, a daily customer, so Barton took the letters out to the curb and changed the sign. Finished, he stood back to reread it, making sure there were no misspellings to embarrass him.

FIVE DAY SPECIAL – BRING IN
YOUR NAKED RIGHT-HAND
PALM AND GET TWO-4-ONE DRINKS

Chapter Twenty-Four

Debbie Bennett and William Stavros were alone in his office.

"I just can't believe the timing," Debbie complained. "For once, Preston was smack dab in the middle of the biggest deal of the century, and he got sick."

"I know," Stavros agreed. "Were you able to get anything?"

"Sure. Lots. Either Clayton and El Queso Grande are keeping him in the dark or this Elohim is pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. All Preston talked about was how they said the man was so real, so believable. And now we're back out of the loop."

"Didn't he go back to work today?"

"He did. He's feeling better. But now that the cat's out of the bag, they didn't see any need to keep him on this detail. They're all worried about how the world is handling the news. They've got him working his normal back channels."

Stavros thought momentarily. "That might be helpful to us."

"How?"

"The rest of the world isn't led by the moronic ilk that America is. Someone's going to get wise to this scam, and maybe your husband can tip us off. If we can find out early enough who's going to do what, we might be able to play a part or lend a hand."

Debbie sat quietly, thoughtfully staring out the window. "Bill, how are they doing this?"

"That's the big question. I don't think the marks were all that hard. For all we know, they could be those carnival tattoos that you apply with water."

"But how could they get them to appear all at once?"

"Debbie, 'they' are the only people who got the marks…they get on the Internet, contact their networks, send out the marks. They all put the marks on that morning and just keep their hands closed till the dramatic moment. I might have been a little convinced if one suddenly appeared on my hand or even yours, someone I know and trust."

“What about Tom Gleason?”

“That fool! I said, someone I trust. Tom hasn’t been with the program in years…still reliving the 1968 Democratic Convention. He has never had the stomach to do what we needed. Besides, that proves my point. Did you see his palm before the broadcast?”

“No,” she answered, “not that I remember.”

“Neither did I. He obviously kept it hidden till the right moment.”

“I still can’t figure out why they’re doing this.”

“You can’t? It’s simple. I’ll bet my last dollar that every Congressman and Senator they want elected is going to have the mark. When the five days are up, instead of floating off to ‘la-la-land’ with Elohim, they will all hold a press conference and tell us that they decided to stay behind, that America was more important than their own personal eternal happiness. Between their noble self-sacrifice and the stamp of approval from ‘god’ himself, how can all of the idiots not vote for them?”

“Makes sense. But all of those chosen can’t stay behind.”

“I haven’t figured that part out yet. Maybe they all disappear to some island or something. They’d be found eventually, but if it’s after the election, who cares? They can come up with some story to explain it then.”

“If that’s their plan, how do we stop it?”

“First, I get my hands on someone with the mark. We need to figure that out. If it’s ink, a tattoo, whatever it is, we need to know. Other than that” – Stavros smiled – “don’t worry; I’ve got a plan.”

ℵ

Turbo heard the dangling bell ring as the front door to his shop opened. The customer wore a floppy, pull-down hat and sunglasses.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh, yes. I need a tattoo.” Even though it was not bright inside, the stranger kept on the sunglasses. Turbo was used to this.

“Nobody needs a tattoo. You just want one.”

“Okay, I want one.”

“Arm, back, ass…where do you want it?”

The stranger extended his right hand, palm-up, and said, “Here.”

“Sorry. We don’t do palms – too many blood vessels, too many nerves; skin wears off too fast; the tat won’t stay; and it’ll look like shit.”

“Look,” the guy said, pulling several $100 bills out of his pocket, “I’ve been to three shops. They all said the same thing. The last one said you were the best, and if anybody could do it, you could.” He dropped the cash on the counter.

Turbo snatched up the money without hesitation and said, “C’mon back.”

The stranger followed him, saying, “What I want on the palm is….”

“I know what you want,” Turbo interrupted.

א

Randolph Duncan stared out his office window at the pastoral Berkeley campus, absently riffling a pile of phone slips with his thumb. The slips were mostly calls from the media that requested his presence, either in person or via the telephone, to discuss the latest developments with Elohim. He normally used this semi-meditative state to create his best thoughts, but today it was not helping. The sun was setting in California, and the slightly red-tinged light, filtering through the trees and creating an intricate network of shadows on the strangely vacant campus, caused him to think of Dante, a writer disdained by Duncan as he disdained all others who promoted the primitive superstitions of the human race.

“Oh…you’re here.” Duncan looked around to see Ki Sung, one of the postdocs in his department, standing at his doorway.

“Ki, come in, come in.” The young man was wearing loose-fitting camos and high-laced black boots. Duncan could not help but think that Ki looked like a North Korean prisoner of war, captured by American troops and dressed up in a soldier’s clothes.

The young evolutionary biologist, Duncan’s protegé, dropped heavily into the chair across from him.

“Can you hear it?”

“Hear what?” asked Duncan.

“The mass ‘I told you so’ coming from the parents of all the students who headed home today with tickets bought by Mom and Dad.”

Randolph laughed. It was the first mirth in quite a while. “If that’s the only thing we hear over the next few weeks and months, we’ll be lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just have a feeling that departments like this…all of them across the country…are going to be dismantled…replaced with, I don’t know, Bible Study faculty,” Duncan said wistfully.

“Back to the bad old days?”

“Yeah!”

“Why, Dunc? Why do you think it’s going to be that way? I mean, everything is still all out there to study. Nothing changed.”

“Ki, it’s like reading a murder mystery. What good does it do to study all the clues if you already know ‘whodunit’?”

“Is that what we were trying to do…find out who the culprit was? I thought you always said there was no culprit.”

Randolph’s eyes hardened at Ki’s comment. “What do you mean ‘you always said’? I always thought you were on board.”

Ki, instead of being intimidated, smiled and said, “Look, Dunc…I was raised a good Catholic. As I got into my teens, I thought going to church was as uncool as everyone else did, so I stopped going. When my parents sent me to Berkeley, I figured out pretty quickly that if you wanted to get laid here, you didn’t wear the ash smear on your forehead on Ash Wednesday, and you didn’t ever bring up God…except to trash Him. Then, of course, I fell in love with this field, and it just so happened that the number one guy in the world in evolutionary biology – the one with seven published books and hundreds of papers, and the one who happened to be right here on campus – was a guy who thought that if you believed in God, you needed surgery to remove that part of your brain because it must be defective.”

Duncan glared at Ki, pausing briefly before saying, “So you didn’t have the backbone to stand up for your convictions?”

Instead of hedging, Ki answered honestly. “No, I didn’t. And I’m not proud of that. I rationalized it…told myself I was a double-agent working in

the enemy camp. Except I never tried to sabotage you or the department, Dunc, and I hope you know that. My work speaks for itself. But…as you said, we were working on a mystery together, trying to solve it…trying to find out 'whodunit.' And like a good pair of detectives working a case, we had differing theories. I hoped, in my lifetime, to find the smoking gun.

"If you want to be pissed off at me for keeping my dirty little secret, that's fine. Just remember one thing, I always have believed in God… believed that God made everything. As far as I was concerned, the work I did was an attempt to understand His methods and techniques. I don't think my…orientation…affected the quality or objectivity of my work. No matter what my beliefs were, I was able to work with you…the biggest God-hater in the field. I, unfortunately, found out soon enough that it was not a two-way street."

"What do you mean?"

"If you had found out, I would have been out of here."

"That's not tr…."

"Don't tell me that, Dunc," Ki interrupted. "Look what you did to Linda. All she did was wear a St. Christopher medal around her neck…a gift from her grandmother. She kept it hidden from you. All semester she wore high-neck blouses. Unfortunately, one day it fell out and you saw it. You reduced her to tears and wouldn't let her back into the lab until she proclaimed to the class that she didn't believe in God."

Duncan was silent, remembering the day.

"You know, as I watched your tirade that day, I couldn't help but think about the Romans putting the Christians in with the lions, unless they denied their faith."

Duncan, still not speaking, lowered his eyes to the top of the desk.

"You weren't happy until she took off the medal and threw it away. Dammit, Dunc, you brought her to tears. God, I was pissed at you that day. I came back to the lab that night and dug it out of the trash. When she finished her thesis…the day she was leaving…I gave it back to her."

Ki paused, easing off the intensity in his voice. "That's been your problem, Dunc. For all of your bombastic and overbearing posturing on the imbecility of religion and the loftiness of science, you couldn't allow your

own mind to remain open…open to a possibility that has never been disproved. How scientific is that?"

Not lifting his gaze, Duncan asked, "Why did you stay?"

"I already told you. You're the best. This was the best department in the world for the work. I also wanted to be here…right at your side…the day you were proved wrong just so I could see the look on your face."

"So…what now? Do we spend the rest of our lives pursuing our research so we can keep saying, 'Oh, wow, look at how God did this'?" Duncan slapped his hands against his cheeks in mock surprise.

Shaking his head disgustedly, Ki answered, "Have you read the Elohim transcripts? They're on the net."

Duncan shook his head.

"You should. He goes off into some of our areas…answers a couple of questions…but mainly insists that He has kept His hands off the process…unless He needed to step in to either move the Earth on to the next phase or save our species from extinction. You know, the kind of stuff that a scientist does when he's managing an experiment."

"You're saying that God is a scientist?" Randolph asked, astounded.

"Yes, I am. And I have no problem working on that basis. You know why?"

"No, Ki, tell me," Duncan said sarcastically.

"Because I've been doing it for years."

"You mean doing *his* work?"

"No…actually, I meant doing yours."

Duncan had no response, and Ki had nothing more to say, so he stood and extended his hand to his longtime mentor. Duncan grasped it in a handshake, then turned it over to see the young postdoc's palm. It was bare.

Surprised, Duncan said, "You didn't get *your* ticket out of here."

Still standing, Ki answered, "No…I didn't," his gaze rock steady.

"Why not?"

"Did you ever see the old movie *Imitation of Life*?"

"Wasn't that the movie about the black girl trying to pass as white?"

“Yeah. I cried my ass off at the ending – when her mother died and it was too late for Sara Jane to tell her that she was sorry for pretending she wasn’t her daughter. There was a scene earlier in the movie where Sara Jane was with her white friends, and they were making fun of a black. Instead of defending the black, or at least shutting up, she joined in, wanting to be a part of the crowd. I didn’t realize until today why I related so much to that movie.

“As you said a minute ago…you always thought I was ‘on board.’ I always made sure you thought that. Every time you ridiculed a Christian, I was right there with my own clever little snipes…just like Sara Jane. I even helped you with your book on religion as a mental disease.

“Sara Jane’s sin was that she wanted to be accepted…accepted by the group she craved…even if it meant denying who she was. I’m not sure why I’m not going to Heaven. But I guess He expected a little more out of me than just a 4.0 GPA and getting published.”

ℵ

Reese, having finished brushing his teeth, crawled into bed next to Claire. He was reaching for the lamp, when Claire said, “Leave it on, honey.”

“Suddenly afraid of the dark?” Reese kidded.

“Just not ready to go to sleep.”

Reese let his head sink into the softness of the hotel pillow, his eyes staring straight up at the ceiling. He slid his hand under the covers and found Claire’s. The moment they touched, she grabbed his hand firmly, squeezing hard.

“What’s wrong?” he tried again.

“I don’t know…I guess I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“This is going to sound silly, but I’m afraid of going to Heaven.”

He rolled to his side, facing her. She was on her back with her head turned, looking back at him. Her eyes were slightly misty.

“You’re afraid of change,” Reese said in a matter-of-fact voice.

“I guess I am. I’ve been so happy with you and the kids. We have such a good life.”

“You didn’t think so when I was unemployed a few months ago.”

Rolling toward him, she put her arm over his shoulder, kissing him. Reese recognized it. Only those in love know this kiss. It is pure affection, pure love without the lust that accompanies the typical kisses of youth. The kiss ended, and Claire only backed slightly away, their faces mere inches apart.

“I never worried for a moment. I never have worried when I’m with you.”

“You’ll still be with me in six days.”

“So He says.”

“You doubt Him?”

“No…I don’t. As you said, it’s just change. What we have here is a known, and where we’re going seems so different…so alien. I feel like one of those wives married to a man who comes home one day and tells her that they’re moving to a new city, one she has never seen. It might be great…but she has had no input into the decision, doesn’t have any say in whether they even go, and hasn’t been there to scope it out first.”

“Well, that’s probably one of the reasons He gives us a choice. We don’t have to go, you know.”

“I’ve thought about that. It just seems nuts to turn it down.”

Reese knew, from years of being with Claire, when to be quiet. She was arguing in her own head and did not need a third voice in the discussion.

After a few more minutes of silence, she decided to invite him back to the party. “What do you think it’ll be like?”

“Well, you heard His descriptions. It sounds as if everything will be the way we want it…however we want it, with none of the negatives.”

“Do you think that just…I don’t know…visualizing a home and having it appear will be the same as…you know…earning one?”

“I’ve thought about that. It’s human nature to devalue anything that’s too easy to get. Maybe I’ll get a chance to ask Him in the next few days. But, you know, on the other hand, I don’t think those things will matter as

much. I mean, if you can materialize a cozy Cape Cod bungalow or Aaron Spelling's mansion, and either is just as easy, you'll probably just materialize what you need to be comfortable. A lot of the motives, conscious and subconscious, for having big houses and fancy cars…will be gone. Maybe we'll all just focus on different things…better things. I think we will."

Claire chuckled softly and said, "You're thinking that we're all going to be living this idyllic, philosophic life, and I'm focusing on things like going out to dinner and not hearing any screaming babies at other tables while we're trying to have a nice meal."

Reese laughed. "That's a big part of it, baby. I'm not saying that happiness is just the absence of all of the crap in life…but it surely is necessary. I mean, look at how miserable it was at my old office. Someone was always complaining about the temperature. There wasn't a setting that made anyone happy because even if you were comfortable, you had to listen to the others complain constantly."

This time Claire laughed. "So, in Heaven, we'll all have our own thermostats."

"Couldn't be Heaven without it," answered Reese, also laughing. "And our own remote controls for the TV."

Fighting back a laugh and trying to look serious, she asked, "Will you still snore in Heaven?"

"Of course…you keep telling me that I must enjoy it. If I'm going to be happy there, I'll probably snore even louder."

"That's it! I'm not going. Heaven won't be any fun if I'm sleep-deprived."

They both laughed, releasing much of the tension of the last few days. Finally, calming down, she kissed him again. This time it was the other kind of kiss, and it was urgent and intense. When they finally separated, both breathing hard, Claire stroked her husband's face and whispered, "Thank you, baby." He smiled and, rather than answering, kissed her again.

Clayton Dean felt the warm water rush against his tight back muscles, slowly unknotting them. It was late, and he craved sleep yet could not break the habit of the nightly shower before bed. Turning, he twisted the outer ring of the shower head to the pulse setting, turning back and shifting until the alternating blast centered on the bad spot between his shoulder blades.

"Clay!"

He could see nothing through the fog on the shower glass but recognized his wife's voice. "Yeah?"

"It's the White House on the phone."

"Crap!"

It was after 11:00 p.m., and he was exhausted.

"Tell them I'll be right there."

"Okay."

Cindy could not be happy about the interruption, either. She had already gone to sleep before he arrived home. Turning off the water, Dean stepped out and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around him, not bothering to dry off. He flipped down the lid on the toilet and sat down, grabbing the extension mounted to the wall, only to hear a dial tone. A slight jolt of adrenaline hit him as he realized the call must have come in on the secure line the NSA had installed in his study. Rubbing his body down quickly, he slipped on the white, terry-cloth robe that was hanging on the hook and hurried out of the bathroom.

"This is Clayton Dean." The formality of this specific phrase was required to facilitate running the voice-recognition hardware. After a series of clicks, the connection was verified, and he heard, "Please hold for the President."

'The President!' he thought. 'What could be the matter now?' The delay was less than a minute.

"Clay, sorry to disturb you." Dean heard a tension and concern in the President's voice.

"Not a problem, sir. What's up?"

"We're getting fragmented reports from Europe…mostly from France…quite a bit from the UK, though…and we haven't nailed down who's doing it yet…but people with Elohim's mark are being targeted."

“Targeted?”

“They are being killed.”

“That’s horrible, sir…but isn’t this a police issue?”

The President’s voice rose a half octave higher. “Clay, I’m not talking about individuals. Hundreds have been hit so far, maybe more. Automatic weapons, RPGs, bombs…heavy-duty, military style hardware is being used. Places they are congregating are being hit to maximize the kill count. Margo’s on her way in now. She’s worried about our side of the pond. The FBI has been intercepting some back-channel chatter…plots for tomorrow…to happen here.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Rather than responding, the President broke the connection.

א

Clayton rode in the back of the black Expedition, closing the window separating himself from the driver. He speed-dialed Preston Bennett’s home number and listened to three rings before he heard a sleepy, female voice answer.

“Debbie, this is Clay. Is Preston there?” The question sounded foolish to him at this hour.

“Hi, Clay. Yeah. Just a second.”

The phone clattered as she dropped it. There were more muffled sounds before he heard Bennett’s voice. “Hi, Clay.”

“Preston, get dressed and get to the White House. I’ll fill you in when you get there.”

Dean ended the connection before he could answer.

א

When Margo Jackson arrived at the Situation Room, she saw that the National Security Advisor, Dick Williams, was present as was the Director of the CIA, George Collins. The two men were huddled with the President,

standing at the status map, a large table with an LCD screen as the surface. The techs could send any image to this device, including maps, "recon" photos, even video feeds for their superiors to view.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

The three turned and greeted Margo, and she joined them at the table, snagging a cup from the service tray next to the table and pouring herself some coffee.

"Anything changed?" she asked.

Williams answered her, "Nothing major. It's six hours later in Paris, so that would be about 5:30 in the morning, and it's a little more quiet now."

"Do we have any idea who's doing this?" she asked.

"Not yet," replied Collins. "We're still in catch-up mode. The kids at Fort Detrick are back-checking the traffic from earlier this evening, running algorithms for key phrases, now that we know what the targets were. We should have a report shortly."

Clayton Dean arrived, joining them at the table. "Good evening, everyone."

The President spoke first. "George, I didn't tell Clay much over the phone. Why don't you bring him up to speed."

"Clay, from what we can tell, several people with Elohim's mark decided they'd like to meet one another…you know…before the trip."

The President expressed his disapproval at the comment by clearing his throat softly.

"To get to know one another over the…uh…next five days. Anyway, it started on the Internet. Blogs immediately appeared with people announcing that they had the mark and inviting others to post if they had it. Somebody suggested they get together. One of the people mentioned that he owned a restaurant…uh, this was in Paris…and the others should come there. They started coming and kept coming all evening. By midnight, there were about four hundred gathered. The best we can tell at this point…since there are conflicting versions from eyewitnesses, and we don't have much in the way of forensics yet…two vans drove up in front of the restaurant. Three men with rocket-propelled grenade launchers got out of the back of

the vans and fired into the restaurant. Between the explosions, the fire, and the collapsing roof from the detonations, nearly all four hundred died.

"Pretty much the same story in Marseilles. It was a public park, almost three hundred people. They used AK-47s on them…just mowed them down and then walked among the bodies and finished off the ones who were still breathing. It happened within about two minutes of the Paris incident. At the same time in London, they took out more than five hundred who had gathered at a cricket field.

"Smaller, as far as number of casualties, in Spain and Germany. No idea, at this point, about who's responsible. No one has claimed credit."

"Margo?" the President said.

"As far as actual attacks on our soil, they've been minor by comparison. Since the European incidents, we've been trolling all the sources and actively contacting major police departments around the country. It's sick… people without the mark, at least I'm assuming that's the case in most incidents, are feeling free to punch, knife, and shoot anyone who has it. Just to give all of you a snapshot of the mentality…NYPD picked up a guy who went on a rampage in Manhattan this evening…thirty-one years old, lawyer, wife and kids. It started late in the day with a client he was defending. The client came by his office at the end of the day, told the lawyer he wouldn't be needing him anymore for the case that was pending, said he'd be leaving soon, and showed him the mark. The lawyer just snapped…beat the stuffing out of the client…left him lying dead on the floor in his lobby. Then he went outside and just started grabbing strangers by the wrist, looking for the mark and not finding any. I guess Wall Street wasn't the best neighborhood for that group. So he went to St. Patrick's on 5th Avenue which turned out to be a better hunting spot. Grabbing them as they left, he beat two more people to death before the police caught him. When they asked why he was doing it, he said, 'What's the big deal? They're going to Heaven anyway!'"

Everyone around the table looked stunned upon hearing the story. Margo continued, "What worries me is that we've been picking up some chatter. Right now it's all really vague, but it has a lot of the regular key words…like *bomb*, *target*…you know. Also, some new words are added… *Elohim*…*mark*…*groups*. All the conversations are happening on throwaway

cell phones – one conversation per phone number, each conversation lasting no more than forty to fifty seconds. We're also getting a lot of blogs trying to organize events here…in D.C., New York, Atlanta…really all over the country, trying to set something up for tomorrow" – she paused and glanced at her watch – "or, actually, this morning. It's the same deal…people with the mark, wanting to congregate and get to know each other now."

The President asked, "Have any of you considered the possibility that the bad guys are actually setting up the gatherings? Anyone on the Internet can claim to have the mark."

George Collins answered, "Good point. If no one is working on it from that angle, we'll get on it."

"Same here," Margo replied.

The LCD map of Europe on the status table changed to reflect a flashing yellow circle in the Middle East, catching their attention. Looking closely, Margo could see that it centered on Jerusalem. One of the intelligence operators, who was seated at a console, got up and walked to the group. Addressing Dick Williams, he said, "We've got something from Jerusalem. There has been a major explosion on the Temple Mount. Apparently, Al-Aqsa Mosque has been destroyed."

"Oh, my God," said Clayton. "Another mosque!"

"Not just another mosque…*the* mosque," said Margo. She went on to explain, "The Al-Aqsa was built on the ground that once held the Temple of Solomon. It's the site Leo Schmidt was referring to when he said that the Bible foretells the Jews rebuilding their own temple on the site before God will return to Earth."

"Was this done by the Jews?" asked Dick Williams.

Collins replied, "Of course we don't know anything yet, but my guess is probably not. A small group of Jews have plotted to do this for years to actually hasten the return, but they've never gotten anywhere close to putting together a plan. No…it just doesn't feel like them."

"The Muslims are going to blame them," said the President.

"Absolutely," answered the CIA Director. "My guess is…that's probably the point."

"It might tie in with the killings earlier this evening," added Clayton.

“You mean somebody’s trying to stir the pot?” asked Williams.

“Could be. Trying to turn all of the religious groups against one another.”

“Obviously,” said the President. “The question is…who?”

א

It was after 1:00 a.m. when Margo left the Situation Room and was driving back to the Hoover Building. She punched a speed dial and listened to the phone ring once before Bill Burke answered, “What’s up, Margo?”

“You gotta love caller ID. Bill, I’m really sorry to bother you, but there is some serious stuff happening, and I thought you might want to know….”

She filled him in on the details as she drove through the still surprisingly busy D.C. streets. By the time she finished, he agreed to meet her at the office, and they disconnected. Suddenly changing her mind, she made a turn and drove to the State Department instead of her office.

א

They had moved Elohim into one of the private quarters within the building. Margo knocked on the hallway door which opened before she could complete a third rap.

“Margo. Please, come in.”

“I was almost to my office, when I remembered that You never sleep.”

“Not quite true, but sufficient for this conversation.”

As he held open the door, she walked in and stopped at a wingback chair, waiting to sit.

“Please, Margo. You’re tired. Have a seat.”

She dropped into the comfortable stuffing of the seat, saying, “I guess I don’t need to fill You in on what’s happening out there.”

“No…you do not. It is most sad.” Elohim circled her chair and sat on the sofa across from her. “But, then again, you did not come here to brief me.”

Looking sheepish, she admitted, “I feel like I would be cheating or something.”

Elohim smiled, saying, “You’re assuming I’ll help you.”

Startled, Margo said, “You won’t?”

“Margo, if I were to intervene…would I have not done so hours ago? As you already know from the discussions I’ve had, I don’t interfere.”

“That’s not true…You interfered on the steps…with Lynn Sheffield.”

“That was not interfering. I could have stopped him before anyone was shot. I knew of his plan…I knew he had the gun…I recognized him in the crowd. Had I chosen differently, none of you would have known his intent. However, had I chosen differently, your friend Bill Burke would not have had the opportunity to redeem himself. The chain of events had run its course before I stepped in. All of the good and all of the bad had been wrought. And that is as it should be. A boatswain and master carpenter does not care for his fleet by keeping them safe in the harbor; he repairs them when they return from the storm.”

“Don’t You feel responsible? It appears that most of this is happening as a result of Your arrival.”

Elohim stared at Margo for what felt to her like minutes before answering. “Do you not find that a strange question to ask me?”

“What do You mean?”

“If I am the Creator, as you yourself believe, am I not responsible for all that happens?”

Margo thought to herself that her head hurt too much for verbal jousting with Elohim. “It is Your intent that evil people do harm to others?”

“Margo, this is my third visit. Each previous time has been followed by horrendous events: events that were attributed to me although they were committed by those left behind, events that included the horrible suffering and deaths of many, events that caused me such pain and sorrow that I have attempted on the second and now on my third visit to perform my task in a way that would stimulate as little strife as possible. Unfortunately, the process of judgment brings out the worst in so many.

“Indeed, it would be a glorious day if I could come to Earth and return with all who live here. And so, to answer your question, it is my *intent* that

all people fulfill their destiny. It is my *wish* that the destiny they endeavor to fulfill is a good one."

Margo rubbed her eyes vigorously, trying to stimulate her brain. "Why the five days…why drag this out? Doesn't it make things worse? And You're right about the judgment thing…it's like setting off a bomb."

"The five days are for the reasons I have already described. Those who are chosen need time to decide if they wish to go. I also found that in past visits when I did not grant the time, it contributed to the chaos that followed. Yours is an interconnected society: debts must be settled; some secrets must be revealed; and some tasks, if not completed, at least must be turned over to another who is worthy to complete them. The departure of the Chosen need not trigger harm to those who remain, when a few days can smooth the transition.

"Informing all people of the judgment is critical if those who remain are to learn from the mistakes that led them to their plight. It is my hope that each visit plants seeds for the future, that each visit removes the uncertainty of faith and replaces it with the certainty of judgment. Surely you must acknowledge that many who stray do so because they do not believe. Not all will embrace the belief five days and more hence; indeed, most will not if the past remains true, and yet some will. Those who do will re-establish the righteous lineage that suddenly will be deprived of the presence of the Chosen."

Elohim paused momentarily, then continued thoughtfully, "Margo, I believe we have a problem of perspective. Allow me to pose a question. In the past there have been Marines who have been a disgrace to the uniform, have there not?"

"Yes."

"And, as a Marine, how did you feel when you either witnessed their deeds or learned of them?"

"Horrible. And angry."

"Why do you think it happened?"

"They were bad apples."

"By that you mean to say they should have never worn the uniform?"

"Absolutely."

“Why do you think they, the bad apples, made it through the selection process?”

“Because the process wasn’t tough enough; it didn’t test them under sufficiently rigorous conditions…and I see Your point.”

Smiling, Elohim said, “Go on.”

“That’s what You’re doing…obviously. You’ve told us this several times. Life on Earth is supposed to be tough. We’re supposed to face adversity and temptations and challenges…and if we don’t meet them head-on…and if we don’t handle them properly…we’re washed out. If You ran around behind us, cleaning up our messes, and heading off our disasters before they struck, we would never be tested.”

“You need to remember, Margo, that the goal of all people should not be a perfect life on Earth. It should be attaining an eternal life in Heaven. Leading a perfect life would be leading a life without a test.”

With a dejected look, Margo said, “So, the monsters mowing people down tonight are serving a purpose?”

Sighing heavily, Elohim answered, “I would not design events such as these…and yet I clearly fashioned those who commit the acts. Their deeds show me their souls with unarguable certainty. Yet their unspeakable acts will also cause others to rise against them…to help those who are hurt…to change the tide. Those wondrous souls will be revealed, as well.”

Margo was exhausted, and it showed on her face. With deep sadness in her eyes, she said, “It just feels wrong. I’m not used to knowing that something can be stopped and doing nothing.”

“Margo, you will not do ‘nothing.’ You and your people will do much to ameliorate these things. No matter if you stop them or not, be assured that these men will face me one day, and their actions today have sealed their fate for an eternity.”

Forcing a wry smile, Margo said, “In the meantime, ‘Leave unto Caesar those things that are Caesar’s….’”

“And leave unto me that which is mine.”

א

Bill Burke was waiting for Margo when she arrived at his office.

"I thought you'd beat me here," he said.

"I made a stop. I went to see Elohim."

"Good choice. Did He give you any help?"

"Nope. We're on our own."

Burke was momentarily taken aback, concern playing across his face.

"We talked about it," Margo explained. "All this…everything we deal with…is just part of His test, I guess."

Bill shrugged. "I guess He figures that the training wheels are supposed to be off."

"Well," she said, slumping into a chair, "any ideas?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Believe it or not, it came to me just before you got here. I was checking e-mails, and look!"

Burke turned his monitor around so that both he and Margo could see it. It had the same Department of Justice header as hers. "Bill, I must be exhausted. I don't see anything helpful."

Burke pointed at the in-box on the screen. "Margo, c'mon. With what's been going on the last few days, I haven't checked e-mail. Look at my in-box."

She forced her eyes to focus. Sighing, she said, "It's just crap…spam."

"Right! Even with all of our fancy filters that we install, it still gets through. There must be a hundred of them. Viagra…stock tips…uh…enlargers…."

"Bill, I get the picture."

"Okay, how are all of the events being set up…the events for the Chosen that are being used to target them?"

Margo sat up, feeling the slight adrenaline rush of understanding. "The Internet…e-mails…blogs."

"Exactly."

"We don't have the time to chase down all of the blogs…get their lists."

"No," said Burke, smiling, "we don't. But we do have time to spam them! Them and everybody else."

“Warn them. Tell them not to go to any meetings, not to get together with any groups.”

“We could also tell them that having the mark is not that popular of a thing right now, that they should remain low-key about it…I don’t know… wear a glove.”

“That won’t work,” said Margo. “They’ll just target people wearing gloves.”

“Well, we’ll figure that out later. Right now we need to get the warning out. I’ve got one of the web guys from Ft. Detrick coming over. He told me on the phone that we’ve already got everything we need to do this.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Gulfstream spun up on the dark tarmac at Reagan National Airport, the pilot and copilot visible inside the lighted cockpit, running through their preflight checklist. Sunrise was expected in thirty minutes, and they were instructed to have their passengers off the ground before then. The copilot glanced up from the clipboard and thought he could see four figures heading for the ramp; this was confirmed a minute later as they approached close enough to be illuminated by the exterior lighting on the jet. “Will,” he said to the pilot, his voice low and steady, “you’re not going to believe who it is we’re carrying.”

The pilot looked out the windscreen and saw the unmistakable face of Elohim. “I guess,” he replied, “we know why we’re going to Rome.”

Elohim, Reese, Reynolds, and McWilliams climbed the short flight of steps into the plane. Reese was the only one who looked groggy this early in the morning. With the previous day’s events on their minds and their training kicking in, the two federal agents were alert and watchful, not relaxing their vigilance until they were all through the cabin hatch. Reynolds stood near the opening and watched the attendant assist in stowing the steps and closing the cabin door. He double-checked the lock lever himself. Pressing the button on his transmitter, Reynolds informed the ground escort that they were on board and secured.

Even though he knew that the advance detail had thoroughly checked out the plane before he arrived, not letting it out of their sight, Nicholas still performed his own check, from one end to the other, including looking under the toilet lids and even lying down to check beneath the seats. He finished in the cockpit, where he introduced himself to the crew and attendant, visually matching their faces to the pictures on their ID badges which were suspended from neck straps. Ever cautious, Reynolds carefully fingered the laminate on the IDs, trying to detect an alteration. Next, trying to make it sound like friendly chatter, he quizzed each of the three on personal matters: their spouses, their kids, cities they had lived in, and schools they had attended. He had studied the facts of their lives earlier in the morning and was satisfied with their answers.

Finished, he returned to the cabin and took the seat across the aisle from Elohim. Craig said, “Did they pass the Hot Dog John’s test?”

Reese, rubbing his eyes, asked, “Hot Dog John’s?”

Reynolds explained, “Several years ago, when a Secret Service detail was escorting Hubert Humphrey, the briefing papers said the pilot was from Toledo, born and raised. So one of the agents was casually quizzing the guy, acting as if he also had briefly lived in Toledo, mentioning all the regular stuff…the kind of facts you could get out of a chamber of commerce brochure…which is where the briefing team had obtained them…when he remembered a fact on his own. Apparently his father-in-law had lived there for several years and raved about the best hot dogs being made at a restaurant called Hot Dog John’s. The agent worked it into the conversation, and the pilot looked blank…hadn’t heard of the place…so the agent, trusting his gut, stopped the takeoff, took the pilot off the plane and back into the terminal. The pilot was an imposter. Since then, it has been the Hot Dog John’s test.”

“Wait a minute, finish the story. Was he planning on crashing the plane or something?” asked Reese, curious.

“No. The scheduled pilot was drunk and didn’t want to get fired. The guy we busted was his best friend and had been his copilot for years. He was covering for him. We didn’t use photo ID tags then. He knew the basic stuff from all of their hours of flying together.”

“I guess they never discussed hot dogs.”

Reynolds chuckled. “No. We found out later that the pilot from Toledo actually hated hot dogs.”

The pilot’s voice informed them that they were departing. Immediately, they all felt the engine thrust, and the plane began to roll to the taxi lane. All preceding flights were long departed from the cleared airspace, and no other planes would be allowed upon the runway and taxi areas until this takeoff was completed. After the low-altitude window of vulnerability was passed, the aircraft quieted as the landing gear was raised and the rate of ascent was reduced to a more reasonable level. Two military fighter jets fell into an escort mode around the Gulfstream at a discreet distance. Bill Burke and Margo Jackson had decided to take no chances with their guest.

Reese, who had been updated on the overnight events, asked Elohim, “I know You don’t ‘do’ the future, but how bad do You think these attacks are going to get?”

Elohim gazed at him with the steady, unnerving stare to which Reese would never quite get accustomed. “I am always amazed and saddened at the capacity for evil that lives within mankind. Prior to receiving the first… information…about these plots, these travesties, I would not have anticipated their occurrence. I can only share with you lessons of the past. After my earlier departures, there were unspeakable bloodbaths. In both instances the majority of all those living were killed…not as a judgment by me…not by the forces of Heaven…but by fellow men. In some cases entire tribes, entire peoples were wiped off the Earth: every man, woman, and child killed; their remains burned; their possessions not looted, but destroyed; and their cities leveled. It was as if the others wanted to eradicate any evidence that they had ever existed.”

“Why?” asked McWilliams. “The ones left behind were all in the same boat, weren’t they?”

“There are essentially two causes. And you have witnessed a microcosm of both. You had a hand in destroying an evil group several years ago in Atlanta. What was the chain of events that led to its total demise?”

“Our bureau had been tracking and tapping the group for months, building a case. They had absolutely no idea we were even on to them. When we had enough of a case, we moved on one of the leaders and his lieutenant. They drew down on us, and in the ensuing firefight both of them were killed. A third member had been on his way to meet them and saw the fight…saw the outcome. He hightailed it back to their rabbit hole, spilling the story to the rest.

“From what we’ve been able to put together, the chain of events went somewhat like this. Three of the group thought the man who had returned had failed the group by not joining the fight and taking out at least a couple of agents. They pulled their weapons and shot him. We found more than thirty slugs in his body. Other members didn’t like that choice and pulled on those three, blowing them away. It just turned into a frenzy. By the time we arrived, there was one guy alive…out of thirty-two. Autopsies and ballistics

later revealed that just about everyone had bullets from just about everyone else's guns in them."

"Just like pack animals," Reese commented. "Stress them enough… present them with an overwhelming threat or force, and they'll turn on each other."

"What's the second reason?" McWilliams asked Elohim.

"The social, spiritual, and moral directions of individuals are a complex web of interrelated tendencies, each set unique to each person. Yet, when viewed objectively from a distance, it is possible to assign subsets. With certain exceptions, all of mankind can be divided into three broad categories. The first group become the Chosen. As we have already discussed at great length, they most clearly grasp the requirements of a harmonious society and a society that encourages each individual to attain self-actualization.

"The second group struggle with internal conflicts. They may intellectually grasp the same requirements as the Chosen, yet they are either unwilling or unable to control their emotional wants and needs. They live their lives wishing they could be better people without ever quite reaching that goal. There is generally much goodness in this group, and many of them are capable of becoming members of the Chosen, if only provided with the additional impetus…the added motivation needed. Without this added motivation, they find themselves in an endless cycle of committing transgressions, followed by making amends for the offenses. There are many among the Chosen who once fit this description and found the strength to transcend the pattern."

Elohim saw understanding and silent agreement on the faces of all three men.

"Many, perhaps most, within this second group, when confronted with the reality of my arrival and the departure of the Chosen, find the necessary reinforcement of the positive side within themselves. They not only set themselves upon the path of redemption, but they attempt to share this discovery…this newfound understanding…with others."

"The zealousness of a born-again," observed Reynolds.

“Yes,” confirmed Elohim. “And prior to my arrival, each of you witnessed the visceral reaction that most have when confronted with this type of person.”

“Ranging from irritation to outright hatred,” said McWilliams. “I went through it myself. After my injury I returned to my religion and, for a time, became something of a fanatic. I was grappling with my paralysis and pretty much used God…I mean You…as my whiskey. I drove a lot of people away. They didn’t want to hear the preaching.”

Nodding, Elohim continued, more somberly this time. “The third group, and sadly the largest by far, have chosen lives that are inherently in conflict with what one must be to join me in Heaven. There are many manifestations of this group…some are violent criminals…some are successful men and women of business…some are entertainers…some are scientists, doctors, and educators…and there are politicians, social workers, clergy, and the destitute. As varied as these lives may be, the underlying urges are common to all: self-centeredness, self-importance, self-gratification, the placing of one’s own needs above all others, and the complete rejection of personal responsibility. They have chosen their fields, not for what those fields will allow them to do for others, but rather for what will be brought to the individuals themselves in terms of money, fame, prestige, power and, of greatest significance, the *appearance* of contribution to society.”

Reynolds interrupted, “Some of them choose to be criminals or homeless for the appearance of a contribution to society?”

“In the case of criminals, many do. Within some of the cultures on Earth, criminals are admired and exalted by their immediate peer group.”

“Certainly the case in the inner cities. It’s the Robin Hood syndrome,” said Reese.

“Yes,” agreed Elohim. “And in those environments, they have convinced themselves that an unlawful life is all that is available to them which, in fact, is not true. They are simply making a choice. With regard to the destitute…people find themselves in that condition for a variety of reasons. Among those who deserve to be within the final group, the unfortunate ones who have become destitute became such because they attempted to succeed at one of the other endeavors and failed. Their choices

were all self-based and self-oriented. Their sense of personal responsibility was nil. They *believed* their teachers and parents when they were told they could 'do anything they wanted to do,' even though they clearly did not have the necessary abilities."

"To protect their 'self-esteem,'" Reese said.

"Yes. Failure which follows unrealistic expectations is a bitter pill to swallow, resulting in alienation and a sense of betrayal. Destitution is the natural result of embarking upon the path that I have described and failing miserably. And since they placed themselves above all others early in life, in their quest for the money, fame, prestige, or power they craved…they had no one to turn to upon their collapse. With the absence of any support from others, their total decline was an inevitability.

"This third group…this majority of mankind…become dependent upon the perceived benefits and pleasures of the self-centered lifestyle. Their need to maintain this lifestyle is as intense as the need of a heroin addict to maintain his supply. Their ability to rationalize when confronted with any conceivable fact, including my presence and the departure of the Chosen, is boundless. You have all seen this when interacting with alcoholics. They can deny the existence of physical proof, will declare a limitless number of witnesses to be liars, and when all else fails, will revert to violence…all simply to maintain their status quo. This is as it is with the third group because they are intoxicated – with themselves.

"After we depart, only the last two groups will be left behind. The group I will call the 'good' will attempt to, as they see it, help the others whom I will call the 'evil.' They will try to get the evil to change their ways…try to coax them onto the path to redemption. They will be making a fatal mistake, because they will be assuming the evil want to be redeemed. And the good will approach all of this with a newfound vigor and intensity that will not allow them to back away. Where they cannot convince, they will attempt to legislate and compel; after all, they will have no doubt as to the righteousness of their message.

"The evil will not tolerate any of this. They may attempt to oppose and resist in a civilized fashion at first. They will go back to their old ways of using the various mass media to portray the offensive aspects of their

lifestyle as normal, harmless, and even noble. However, with the glaring reality of my recent visit and the obvious absence of the Chosen, the good will no longer succumb to the mind-numbing techniques of the past. After all, I am no longer an abstract concept, a superstition, a delusion, a supernatural myth.

"The pressure will grow on both sides until the evil side demonstrates an ability the good side abhors – the ability…indeed, the propensity…for violence. Following the past visits, segments of the good rose up, understanding the necessity for physical battle at certain times, and attempted to oppose the force of evil. Yet it was a force that overwhelmed them, nearly wiping them out. The evil were so opposed to criticism being directed at them…so opposed to their choices being questioned at all…that they hunted down the others, the good, until they had silenced the voices. Only a few of the good remained…forced to hide…forced to conceal their beliefs. No longer proselytizing, they learned to teach only their own children. Eventually, they found a few others of the good. Enclaves were formed, congregations established, religions reborn…all over thousands of years."

"What happened to the society immediately after the good were either killed off or pushed underground?"

"You know that answer, Reese. You've warned against it in your books and lectures."

"I guess I'm curious about the rate and degree."

"The rate is incredibly rapid," answered Elohim. "The degree is nearly total."

"Why does it happen?" asked Reynolds. "I mean, at that point isn't the world essentially filled with the like-minded? Who are the enemies?"

"They all are," answered Reese before Elohim could speak. "It doesn't take the mathematical mind of Walter Penfield to understand that you cannot subtract more from the sum than you add, unless someone else is putting more in. If all of those who contribute more to society than they take are either removed by Elohim or killed by the others, it's really a simple calculation. All of the aspects of civilization, all of the benefits of food, security, comfort, sanitation…the list is nearly endless…essentially go

bankrupt, either literally or figuratively. The core perspective of narcissists is that they deserve whatever they want or need, without recognizing or acknowledging any requirement for quid pro quo. As far as they are concerned, their mere existence is more than sufficient to compensate the rest of humanity for what they take.

"Only among the good and the Chosen will you find those who believe that a transaction must be win-win for all parties. For the narcissist each transaction must be win-lose with the narcissist the only winner. A society is nothing but transactions…millions of them a day. How can there be winners and losers in a world of only narcissists?"

"So they begin to turn upon each other…in a struggle best described as survival of the fittest," Elohim said, continuing Reese's line of thought. "And the struggle accelerates exponentially, as the perceived availability of resources dwindles. Alliances are quickly formed and more quickly betrayed. Political structures, originally conceived as mechanisms for the benefit of the group, disintegrate under the pressures of self-interest. On an individual level very few are able to find any help, any support from others."

"Every man for himself," added Reese.

McWilliams, sadness and worry etched upon his face, asked, "It sounds like a fairly complex process. Does this take years to play out?"

"Again, I cannot speak for tomorrow; yet, based upon the past, I would have to answer that it could be a timetable measured in months, rather than years."

"It's basically anarchy?" asked Reynolds.

"No, that is not being fair to the concept of anarchy. Anarchy – if all who participate are enlightened and place the welfare of the whole above the needs of the one – is an ideal structure. In fact, it most closely describes Heaven. Anarchy – if practiced only by the self-possessed – is chaos."

Reynolds asked, "Anarchy in Heaven. I can't help but ask…."

"You are wondering how there could be anarchy in Heaven with me present?"

"Uh, yes. It seems like more of a benign monarchy."

“I have no interest in ruling. Most who rule do so to obtain the power of the throne. I have no need for that power. That is exactly why I have chosen to populate Heaven with those who do not require rules and laws.”

They rode through the morning sky in silence, each of them contemplating the immediate future. After a time, Reese asked, “None of what You’ve described explains why they are now targeting the Chosen?”

Elohim answered wistfully, “Reese, remember our discussions about Lucifer?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You must remember, in the midst of all of this, that he lives within many. His only unthinking compulsion is to keep as many here as he can. The Chosen are lost to him…forever. His anger…his fury…will cause many to perform foul deeds. Some acts will be pure rage with no purpose. Those who have been chosen will go to Heaven whether they are killed or not. Other acts will be calculated to tempt some, to turn some away. He will view each individual soul diverted from Heaven as a victory. No matter what form his plan may take, it will surely be unspeakably evil.”

The attendant served breakfast, stopping the conversation while plates were set out, and coffees and juices were poured. Finishing, the attendant excused himself and returned to the front of the plane. McWilliams and Reynolds, seated across the cabin from Reese and Elohim, were engaged in muted conversation regarding the security issues which would be facing them in Rome upon their arrival. Reese sat directly facing Elohim, so close that their serving trays very nearly touched. He leaned forward and softly asked, “Just about everything that You’ve told me indicates that You are a pragmatist…and that Your only goal is to cultivate candidates for induction to Heaven.”

Elohim nodded and said nothing.

Reese continued, “From what You’ve described of the probable chain of events following Your…our departure, it just doesn’t seem consistent with Your goal. I mean, the smaller group…the ‘good’ group…apparently would be Your potential pool of future candidates…at least the best hope for the creation of more, anyway. And yet, they are going to be essentially wiped out, and the nasty group will prevail.”

“You’re wondering why, after our departure, I don’t gather up the second group, put them on an ark and destroy the rest?”

Taken aback by his bluntness, Reese agreed, “Yes, I guess so. It just seems that it would be consistent with Your goals.”

Smiling, Elohim said, “Are you familiar with what members of your medical profession refer to as the ‘super bug’?”

Reese, accustomed to Elohim’s apparent changes of subject, answered, “Antibiotic resistant bacteria?”

“Yes. And are you familiar with the process that creates these resistant forms?”

“I believe so. I’m sure to get the quantities all wrong, but the concept is fairly simple. I have a trillion nasty bacteria in my body. The doctor gives me some penicillin which kills off all but a hundred of them, those that manage to live through the full dosage. Those survivors have a slight genetic mutation that allows them to survive. Since they are the only survivors, when they reproduce, all of their offspring have the resistance. Their numbers reach a trillion again, and I get sick again. The doctor gives me a stronger antibiotic which kills all but a hundred or so. Those who survive again have a mutated resistance as will their offspring. And so it goes, until you eventually have a new, powerful breed of bacteria that cannot be killed by any of the known antibiotics.”

“Basically, yes, that is how it works.”

“The obvious connection is that You want the remaining group, the group You called ‘good,’ to go through the same process.”

“Yes. When they are nearly eliminated from the face of the Earth, and only a relative handful survive, those survivors will be alive because they are not only good…they are, to use the term you mentioned a moment ago, pragmatic…they are strong…they are quick-witted…they are wise. If those things were not true, they would not have survived the onslaught from the others. They will also carry with them an even more strongly held belief structure, more strongly held because it has been hard won. The development of this new group cannot occur without the presence of the others, any more than the super bug can come into existence without the presence of the antibiotics.”

“So You are planning on taking the human race to a new level, higher than where we are today?”

“No, I am merely repeating a process. Reese…you and Claire, Nicholas, Craig, Margo, and all of the others…all of the Chosen…are descendants of that tiny band of survivors after the last great struggle.”

Reese was stunned. “This is amazing. I thought that simply wiping out the bad guys would be the pragmatic approach. This is way more…uh… pragmatic. But I have a question, my parents…they certainly weren’t….”

“The wonder of genetics, Reese. Breed two black dogs, and within the litter of black pups might be one that is pure white. All are the offspring of the same parents, yet there is a certain confluence of events that creates something different, sometimes something special. And the seeds for that one white pup were in the pool a thousand generations before, successively hiding and coming forward again and again until that one moment in time. All of the pieces to the puzzle that is Reese Johnson were strewn among many people. You are only aware and thinking about the contribution of your parents. Imagine, from my perspective, the joy of watching those pieces weave their way through the maze of human couplings for hundreds of generations…until finally they were all consolidated within those two people. The pieces, uncombined, did them no good. Yet, when they mated, the person who was literally thousands of years in the making came into being. It was as if Reese Johnson was turned into dust millennia ago and scattered by the winds…and then, in the time since, wind and rain and all of the forces of nature gradually reassembled you until you became the individual who sits before me today. And what I described for you is also true for the others who are chosen.”

Grinning wryly, Reese said, “You are making it hard to be humble.”

Laughing softly, Elohim answered, “Humility is not a refusal to recognize one’s own specialness; it is a willingness to also recognize it in others.”

“How did so many of us marry a person who is also one of the Chosen?”

“How could it be any other way? After the last cataclysm, when your kind were nearly destroyed, one of the survival skills that was developed

was the ability to recognize another of your own ilk…of your own belief structure and moral character. Those, like all of the other traits, were naturally selected by the ordeal. Each of you has known instinctively when you were in the presence of another of your group. This extends to all of your interactions: friends, business acquaintances, politicians seeking your vote. There is a mechanism within you that confirms or denies the standing of all others…before the first word is spoken. You, and those within your group, have this skill because it was necessary for the survival of your ancestors. The others did not need it and, because evolution discards the unneeded, do not have it.

"Therefore, it is inevitable that most of your group would marry within your group. Sadly, some who possess the skill, choose to ignore it. They convince themselves that the subtle message is wrong. Rather than trusting this instinct, they prefer to look at the external presentation of the others, to listen to their words, to evaluate their visible deeds and actions intellectually, to be swayed by their credentials. These are criteria at which the others excel. They excel because they have created them. And they excel because these are the criteria upon which they evaluate one another.

"Reese, the point is that your group, when it interacts with the others, is out of its element. You are playing their game, to use a popular phrase, and can never be as good at it as they are. Yet, their game can be attractive to some within your group. It is human to surrender to the glamour, to want to be a part of the popular culture and crowd. A large segment of your cohort gives in to those temptations early in life. As the brain completes its critical formation in your late twenties, the attraction of the others begins to pale, and their externally oriented lifestyle is first perceived as hollow and empty. Most of you return to your true selves.

"Unfortunately, some of your group have married during that time, and that choice, all too often, was based upon the purely external. Because each of you has a highly developed sense of morality, and because you do place others above yourself, a marriage to one of them tends to be a trap for a member of your group, a trap not easily escaped. This happens mainly because one-half of the union follows the rules, and the other does not. As a result, you either stray from the path, giving in to the pressures from your

mates, or hunker down and preserve your ideals and your character, having little to share with your wives or husbands other than social engagements and the marital bed."

"I think we've all known couples like that."

"Most of the couples to whom you are referring do not have a member of the Chosen as one of the mates, because most of the Chosen have married within their own group. The couples you are recalling are those with an individual from the second group who was foolish enough to marry one of the 'others.'"

Elohim did not appear to have anything to add. He had, again, given Reese quite a lot to think about. Turning, Reese stared at the bright blue morning sky through the window and said nothing.

א

The morning sunlight barely penetrated the window blinds in Margo Jackson's office. She had turned off the overhead lights and was asleep on the sofa which normally was used for informal meetings. Bill Burke heard her snoring softly as he opened the office door, feeling wretched about interrupting her. Having just come down the hallway and through the outer office that was occupied by Margo's secretary during regular hours, he was unaccustomed to the dimness and fumbled for the light switch, intending to turn on only one of the three sets. Instead, his hand brushed against them all, flooding the room in brightness.

She instantly sprang upright, her hand instinctively clutching for the sidearm that fortunately was stowed in her desk drawer at the moment. Eyes wide and sweeping the room, she spotted Burke, still standing in the doorway, grinning sheepishly. "Is that your agency training or boot camp kicking in?" he joked.

Shaking her head to clear the fog of sleep, she answered, "Neither. It's from living alone in Washington, D.C." Rubbing her eyes, she asked, "What's up? And why the hell are you so peppy?"

"The answer to your second question is…I don't know. Ever since Elohim fixed me, I've felt like a twenty-year-old."

Margo had shifted to the front edge of the cushion, her long legs apart, her knees higher than her waist, her elbows resting on her knees with her face buried in her hands. “Maybe I should arrange to be shot,” she muttered.

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Bill, you’re my boss and all that, but I sincerely hope that you didn’t wake me up so we could have a chat about how damn wonderful you feel.”

Chuckling, he answered, “Actually, I was having withdrawals. I missed your sunny disposition.”

She replied with a casual hand gesture.

Changing his tone to a more businesslike one, Burke explained, “I think we have a situation brewing. The spam seems to be working fairly well. A lot of the groups who were planning on meeting today have opted for virtual get-togethers in organized chat rooms.”

“Good.”

“Yeah…so far, with one glaring exception…New York City.”

“Great!”

“As we watched the Internet traffic through the night, the tide was going in the right direction. A lot of the participants were expressing concern about our warnings. There was talk about canceling, using some chat rooms, having only five-to-ten person get-togethers. It was going well. About an hour ago, some guy started shooting e-mails and instant messages all over the place, to all of the people who had expressed an interest in a big meeting. He ranted and raved about how being one of the Chosen required backbone, how Christians didn’t hide from the lions. The clincher, I think, was his last tactic. He, assuming it’s a ‘he,’ started e-mailing them all and telling them that maybe this was a test…a final test by God…to see if they were actually worthy of going to Heaven.”

“Oh, crap.”

“I know. It worked. It really lit a fire under the rest. He sent his messages to all of the boroughs. Now he’s expanding…Connecticut, New Jersey…farther and farther. He’s latched on to the chat rooms and lists of the other groups, the ones who had decided to stay home. They’re madly chartering busses and renting vans this morning so they can join the event.

And that's just what we can pick up from the net. I'm sure a lot more are already in their cars and on their way. He, whoever he is, has managed to turn a mild meet-and-greet into an organized act of defiance, standing up to the evil forces that want to crush them. The florid prose is his, not mine."

All indications of fatigue were gone from Margo's face as Burke's news triggered her adrenaline response. "Where's the party?"

Shaking his head, Bill answered, "Where else? Times Square."

"Have the…?"

"Our New York bureau has been organizing with NYPD since the tide turned. The governor is rounding up the National Guard. The local media have been asked to rotate announcements keeping all traffic away from Times Square."

"Right…that'll work."

"The mayor wants to spoil the event before it can start: block the streets, break up gatherings, turn people away before they can form a large enough mass."

"A target, you mean."

"Exactly."

"Do you think that can work?"

Burke slowly let out a breath before answering, "I don't know."

"It seems to me that the best way to prevent a gathering in Times Square is to let in the cars, not keep them out. How could you meet in the middle of that mess?"

"That's true. It's the mayor's call, and he's made it. I'll pass your thought on, but I think he's committed right now."

"Do we know who this guy is yet?"

"Nope. He's smart. His e-mails are coming through a jumble of interconnected sources and public wi-fi providers. Our techs are still trying to chase it through the spaghetti. All we have is his user name…he calls himself *'thelamb*.'"

"He sounds a little scary. Do you think he's setting them up?"

Bill Burke stared down at his knees for a moment, his eyes in motion as if having a REM state while awake. "My gut tells me there's something

wrong with him. I mean, people had decided to take the conservative course – stay home, be safe – and he eggs them on to congregate. Either he's setting them up, or he's a fanatic. Either way, yeah, he's a problem."

א

The phone chirped once, and the man sitting behind the desk, staring out the window, snatched it up. "Yes?"

"It seems to be working. People are already showing up," said the voice on the phone, getting directly to the point.

"Obstacles?"

"Lots of cops, FBI, Port Authority. I understand some National Guard troops are on their way. But they have set up barricades and closed Times Square to cars."

"Excellent. That'll help. Are the authorities going to stop us?"

"Don't know at this point. It depends on the turnout. They'll be overwhelmed if enough people show up."

"How about the hardware?"

"In place and ready."

"Keep me posted."

The stranger in the darkened office pressed the button to break the connection. He immediately turned the phone over and popped off the back cover, removing the battery and dropping it into his desk drawer. Getting up, he took the now inert cell phone into the restroom that adjoined his office and turned on the water, holding the open phone under the stream. As he performed these steps, he knew the caller was going through the same steps.

א

Stanley Witherspoon was excited. Since he never before had been to Manhattan, everything looked strange and larger than life to him. Punching Times Square into the GPS navigator on his car, he had departed his home

in New Haven hours ago. The directions got him within blocks of the target "star" on the screen before a police officer had turned him back, telling him that, for safety reasons, the city was not going to allow the assembly. He had already been warned about this and was undeterred. Finding a spot to park took another hour. He jotted down a map from the GPS and locked up, heading off on foot, feeling the excitement build within him.

Witherspoon, fifty-nine years old and a widower, had been alone yesterday, watching the televised statement. When Elohim described the mark, Stanley was flabbergasted to find it on his palm. His first impulse, as it had always been with any new or interesting event, was to share it with Kathy, his wife of thirty-two years. For the ten-thousandth time he had to remind himself that he had lost her six years ago. But this time, because of what the mark signified, he was not as depressed as at other times in the past; it meant that he would be with Kathy once again and in only five days.

There were many others on foot, all walking briskly in the same direction as he, obviously for the same purpose. Stanley spotted the mark on the hand of some of them and exchanged smiles and knowing looks. As he walked, he wondered about the coincidence of the mark on the palm of the right hand and the tradition of the waved greeting which exposed this palm to the other person. He also wondered about the others, those without the mark, and why they were joining the impromptu gathering. He knew his motives. Except for the constant presence of Kathy, Stanley had lived a rather solitary life. Both of them always seemed to have a sixth sense about other people, and nearly everybody came up short. Occasionally, people would get through the initial barrier, but those who did had some aspect to their lifestyle or mannerisms that made either him or Kathy uncomfortable. As a result, they had developed no real friendships in their three decades together. So long as he had Kathy, Stanley never felt a need for friends. Since her death, loneliness had been the dominant emotion in his life, triggering a constant battle against depression and despair. From the smallest habit to the largest event, the absence of Kathy turned activities that had once brought him joy and happiness into empty time-wasters. Stanley no longer cared to see a movie, eat at a restaurant, or go on a trip

without her. Her company, her presence had always been the critical ingredient that made everything fun and fulfilling.

That was why he decided to come here today. It was the first thing in six years that had appealed to him, perhaps because he somehow felt that she would be here, or perhaps because it seemed like a prelude to joining her. There was also something else: a primal, almost subconscious urge to congregate with the others, the Chosen, as Elohim called them. Otherwise, there could be no explanation for Stanley defying the authorities, which was most uncharacteristic. He did not see it as defiance. After all, he thought, he was not committing a crime, was not hurting another. They were simply concerned about his safety, and he did not share their concern.

As he passed more side streets, nearing his destination, more men, women, and children flowed into the river of people all heading for the same goal. There was no running or pushing. The fellow Chosen, as well as the others, walked briskly and steadily forward, yet paused to allow another to cross or hesitate, sharing a friendly smile, offering a hand if someone was having a difficulty.

According to Witherspoon's hand-drawn map, he was nearly two blocks from Times Square when he saw the barricades and the line of police in dark blue uniforms ahead. The street was entirely blocked, and the officers were in riot gear, wearing Lexan face masks and rigid body armor and holding Lexan shields in front of their bodies. Stanley could not help but notice the incredible incongruity, considering the nature of the approaching crowd. Regardless of the details of the situation, for some reason he felt serene. The front edge of the group reached the police line. They did not surge against it in any attempted show of force, merely stopping a foot or two back from the barricades, as would a crowd awaiting the removal of the velvet rope, allowing them to enter a theater for opening night.

Stanley was quite near the front. Since he had come alone, he felt unencumbered to thread his way through the bodies to the line of police where he found several of his group chatting calmly with the officers. Directly across from him was a middle-aged man who was wearing the NYPD uniform and working very hard to maintain a stern expression.

Looking at this officer, Stanley said, "That gear must be hot."

The cop blinked a few times before focusing on Witherspoon. Obviously, he had been trained not to engage in personal chatter with members of a mob that they were supposed to control. The sheer normalcy of Stanley Witherspoon was written all over his face.

"Yes, it is. Even when it's a chilly morning like this."

Checking the cop's name tag, Stanley said, "Cavalino. Is that Italian?"

The silliness of the question struck them both, and they laughed. "Yeah. I'm Italian," he finally answered.

"I'm Stanley Witherspoon. Uh, that's English."

Stanley wanted to shake Cavalino's hand, so he extended his, taking a half step forward. The movement caused the cop to tense, as did the officers on either side of Cavalino. Alarmed, Witherspoon quickly stepped back. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to…," he said, dropping his hand back to his side. He noticed Cavalino's eyes glance briefly at the mark on Stanley's palm.

Suddenly, the barricades, riot gear, and body shield, as well as the demeanor of the stranger across the line from him, made Cavalino feel like a bully. As Cavalino's eyes swept the group who had approached their station point, he saw other members chatting with officers, lifting their small children up for a better view of the police equipment, showing family pictures from their wallets and purses. One of Stanley's group had brought a bright pink Styrofoam chest and, after placing it on the asphalt and removing the lid, was pouring coffee for everyone around her, including the riot cops, and offering cheese Danish.

The normal stance for riot control was to hold the shield forward with the left hand, if right-handed, while keeping the right hand free to draw a gun loaded with rubber bullets. Cavalino snapped the leather thong closed on his sidearm, shifted his shield around so that it was no longer between him and Witherspoon, and stuck out his hand. "I'm Nick Cavalino."

The effect was instantaneous. Either because the other officers felt as Cavalino did or because they simply reacted to his first move, like a wave rippling outward in both directions, the rest of them tucked their shields away from the group, relaxing their stances. Stanley gripped Nick Cavalino's hand firmly. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Nick." As he released

himself from the handshake, Witherspoon glanced down and saw that Cavalino also had the mark. “You’re one of us,” he said, feeling an immediate camaraderie.

Smiling, Nick answered, “Yes, it was a bit of a surprise.”

“Yeah, same here.” Looking down the line of police, Stanley asked, “How many of your colleagues…?”

“A few. You know, it’s a little weird, but there really weren’t any surprises there. I watched Elohim’s statement like everyone else. I was working at the precinct when it was on, instead of being at home with my family, and watched the TV in the bullpen. Afterward, everyone started asking everyone else…then it kinda stopped. It was just too sad, you know, for the guys who didn’t have it. Those of us who did just sort of found each other, privately. In our precinct there were four I would have pegged to get it. Three of them did.”

“It’s the accountant in me, I guess, but I have to ask…that’s out of how many?” Witherspoon asked.

“About two hundred in our station.”

“Wow. One and a half percent. I figured for police and firemen it would have been higher.”

Cavalino smiled. “We actually didn’t do too badly. My wife works as a paralegal at the DA’s office. Among the lawyers there…not one.”

“Well, that makes sense. How could it be Heaven…?”

They both laughed again as the nearby woman with the pink Styrofoam chest brought two cups of coffee to them. Stanley took a sip and felt the warmth spread down his chest and abdomen. “Nick, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the deal here? I mean, why won’t they let us in?”

“Didn’t you hear the news about the other groups? Didn’t you get the e-mails?”

“Not really. I’ve got a very aggressive spam filter. I also don’t get any e-mails unless they come from a pre-authorized list of senders. I’m not much on news, either.”

“Well, how did you find out about this event?”

“I was searching the net about Elohim and the mark. After His statement, I’ve spent quite a bit of time doing that. I just came across the blogs that were organizing this. Why? What’s going on?”

“Europe, since they are several hours earlier than here, had some overnight and early morning gatherings, you know, like this but smaller. Same deal…people with the mark wanting to get together, to meet. Once they assembled, shootings or bombings started…most of them were killed.”

“By someone in the group?” Stanley asked incredulously.

“Nobody knows yet, but my guess is probably not.”

“Who would do that?”

“Like I said, I’m Italian. So, guess what? Big surprise – I’m a Catholic. From all those hours in catechism classes, I remember they taught us that God isn’t the only player.”

“The devil?” asked Witherspoon, saying the words softly.

“Not necessarily the guy in the red suit with the horns and tail, you know…but evil…bad…the other end of the spectrum from God.”

“Yin and Yang.”

“Yep. In my business, that’s what we deal with all the time. In my old neighborhood it’s a cliché, you know, the Italian brothers – one becomes a cop and the other a priest. Doesn’t actually happen that much, but it stuck. Anyway, the old joke was that they both worked opposite ends of the same street. But that’s basically all we see. We’re up to our eyeballs in it every day. Soon enough a lot of the guys start to think that the whole world’s that way…’cause it’s all around them. They start to sour.”

“Maybe that’s why so few are going…uh…got the mark.”

“Could be. Yeah, you’re probably right. Anyway, to answer your question, there are a lot of people who just can’t stand to see anything pretty…can’t stand to see anyone happy. They have to vandalize the nicest places. They have to do something to make a happy person miserable. It’s like they want to even the score…to make everyone feel as crappy as they do. Well, this mark…this announcement from Elohim…has made a small group of people very, very happy. And there won’t be any appeals. Nobody can go to court and claim unfairness and get added to the list by some judge.”

“They can try! Imagine Elohim being handed a court order requiring Him to take an additional group to Heaven.”

Nick’s eyes lit up. “Oh, wouldn’t that be great? From the ones I’ve worked around all these years, I can tell you that there are some judges who believe they have that much power.”

Stanley could hear Nick’s earpiece crackle slightly. Cavalino reached up and pressed the earbud slightly. After a moment he tapped the button to respond. “I’ll take a look and report back.”

Turning to the younger officer to his left, Cavalino said, “Peterson… climb up on something…higher…and get a feel for how many we’ve got here.”

Obviously quite athletic, Peterson handed his shield to another and hopped onto the lower railings of the barricade. Spreading his arms for balance, he stepped up to the top rail and looked over the heads of those closest. Still staring down the boulevard, he said to Cavalino, “I have no idea, Nick. It’s solid all the way for at least seven or eight blocks.”

Nick Cavalino again tapped the transmit button and reported the rough size of the group, listening intently for a minute. As he listened, a helicopter, flying just above the building tops, passed over the street. Nick acknowledged his instructions and turned his attention back to Stanley. “It looks like we’ve got a pretty similar situation on several of the approaches. Now they’re worried about being able to provide security to everyone with the crowd all spread out like this.”

Several of the others on Stanley’s side of the line had moved a little closer to try to listen to Cavalino’s update. One of the others, the woman with the pink Styrofoam ice chest, asked, “Why not just let us in?”

“Actually,” answered Cavalino, “they’re considering that. At least if you’re all in one spot…in Times Square…we can set up some kind of a security net. We’ve got the routines from all of the New Year’s bashes; everyone would know what to do…have an established station. Plus, since we’ve had it closed all morning, they’ve had a chance to sweep the square, at least fairly well, and haven’t found anything planted.”

“So we wait,” said Witherspoon, looking over his shoulder at the others near him. “It looks like a pretty patient group.”

Chuckling, Nick answered, “Yeah, a little too patient. Apparently, on some of the approach streets, the groups have just decided to have their get-togethers there. They are making the best of the situation, I guess. They’re just milling and shaking hands and chatting…basically ignoring the cordon. It’s playing hell with the traffic in the rest of Manhattan.” Smiling, he continued, “We’re just not used to this from a crowd. There’s no pushing against the police line, no shouting or arguing. None are even trying to cajole the cops to let them through.”

“It’s a different kind of group,” said Stanley.

“You can say that again. I’ve been listening to the chatter on the radios. The other guys working the lines feel as silly as we do, wearing all the riot gear. One of the captains in charge of this detail made the comment that with this group, we probably could have just strung up caution tape across the streets, and all of you would have just stopped at it.”

Smiling, Stanley answered, “I guess that’s one of the reasons we’re in this group.”

“Reminds me of the way my uncle has described things. He likes to talk about how much has changed. When he was a beat cop years ago, the newspaper vendors used to throw bundles on street corners, and people would just take a paper and leave a nickel on top of the pile. No one swiped the papers…no one took the cash. The vendors would come back at the end of the day and get their pile of nickels.” He smiled ruefully. “That really was a different time.”

“They had their share of bad guys,” Stanley responded.

“Oh, yeah. From the way he talks about those days, it just seems like things were more black and white.” Cavalino stared off in the distance for a moment, sadness flickering across his face. “I’m really going to feel sorry for my men four days from now…you know…the ones who are staying.”

“Nick, I think we are all going to feel bad about the ones who don’t get to go.”

“Yeah…that, too. But I’m talking about the cops left behind. In any neighborhood, in any city, there are really good guys and really bad guys, and the rest are in the middle.”

“A bell curve.”

"Yes. Well, that big group in the middle are followers. They follow the role models, the examples. A lot of them see the quality of life and the happiness and the relative security of the good bunch, and they want that. So they'll emulate that group." He paused and waved his hand to include the mass of people on Stanley's side of the line. "This group. There are a lot of people here this morning…without the mark. They aren't leaving in four days. Yet they're here, hanging out with you, wanting to be like you, wanting to associate with the group they could have joined…maybe almost joined, except for a few bad decisions in their lives. And they are acting like you. They're calm and peaceful, respectful of authority and the rules.

"You know, in one of the crummier neighborhoods, there's an old guy… he's probably seventy by now. When he was young, he was relatively famous. Played jazz and pop, toured a lot, even made some albums. One day, I guess, he just quit recording, quit touring, and moved back into the neighborhood. All the kids then thought he was so cool. He taught them music, taught them how to play instruments, but he also tutored them on their school work. They loved him. He walked the streets whenever he wasn't working with one of the kids or sleeping, just walked. He would see the neighborhood kids spraying graffiti, acting up…whatever it was…and he would nail them right then and there. I saw him march into the middle of a gang who scared *me* and grab the leader of the gang by his ear, pulling him off the curb and into a doorway."

Stanley laughed at the image. Nick continued, "Yeah, it's funny now. At the time, I thought he was going to get killed; I was calling for backup. But he read that kid the riot act. I didn't hear the words, but I could see the expressions and hear the tone of the thing. When he was done, he stuck out his hand and the kid handed over his knife and his gun, just gave them to the old man. Then the two of them walked back out to the gang. The kid, the gang leader, said something to the others, and they all disarmed. Every piece! On a pile on the sidewalk! Then they split – and not together; they all went off in different directions. We never had another problem from that gang. The old man pulled a paper bag out of a trash can and loaded it up with all of the weapons, picked up the bag, and marched down the street to where I had been watching, handing it over."

“Sounds like quite a guy.”

“Stanley, that’s not the point. For more than thirty-some years that guy has kept his little piece of the world in check. It’s not a perfect neighborhood. No place is, but it’s a hell of a lot nicer place to live than all of the neighborhoods around it. That tiny little piece of real estate has produced more high school graduates, more college graduates, more cops, more teachers, more firefighters, you name it, than any comparable neighborhood in town. And that’s not because of us, and it’s not because of the mayor or any outreach programs by do-gooders. It’s because of one old man who happens to be good to the bone…and who also happens to care. I don’t know because I haven’t gone to visit him, but if anybody deserves to have the mark, to have a ticket to Heaven, it’s that old man. And in four days he’ll be gone.

“It’s people like him…and people like you, Stanley, who make our job…out there in our patrol cars and blue uniforms…a lot easier. It stops the scales from tipping the other way.”

“You keep saying ‘you’ as if you aren’t one of us.”

“In my mind I know I am. I just still can’t believe I am. Maybe that’s part of it. I don’t know. Anyway, in four days, I’m afraid the scales are not only going to tip…I’m afraid they’re going to shatter. That one sweet end of the bell curve is just going to be lopped off, taking away all of that influence, all of those examples.”

Stanley looked at the sadness in Nick’s eyes for a long time before answering, “He doesn’t have to go, you know. Neither do we. Elohim told us that we can stay if we want. I don’t know this guy, but from the way you’ve described him, I’ll bet he stays.”

Stanley’s words did not comfort Cavalino. “That sucks. He deserves it. He should go. But my point is…he isn’t the only one. They’re scattered all over the world, each one doing his or her thing. They are like tent poles; remove them and the whole thing comes down.”

Stanley had not given too much thought to the aftermath. Nick’s description worried him deeply. He saw Nick’s hand rise up to touch the earbud again. Acknowledging the orders, Nick turned to Peterson again,

saying, “Take ’em down. Spread the word. Remove the barricades and organize a flank formation. Let’s try to escort our party to the Square.”

Stanley watched as the police officers began folding the barricades and started moving them to the sides of the street. Many of the group lent a hand with the equipment. After the obstacles were cleared, Stanley’s group slowly proceeded forward as the officers split into two roughly equal groups and moved to the sidewalks, checking doorways, windows, and alleys, until they had traversed the remaining two blocks and arrived at Times Square. Witherspoon could see orderly streams of people coming into the area from other directions, and the sheer quantity of people overwhelmed him. Before immersing himself in the mass of humanity, Witherspoon found Nick Cavalino, standing at the last corner they had passed, issuing orders to his officers. He noticed Stanley approaching and paused, sticking out his hand. “See you soon, Stanley.”

“You, too, Nick. A pleasure to meet you.”

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Nick Cavalino watched his newly made friend wander into the crowd for only a minute and then returned to his heightened sense of alertness. Typically, in a situation like this, most of his attention would be on the crowd, scanning faces for an expression that did not fit, watching hands and coats for the sudden appearance of a weapon. But today he felt as though he was on bodyguard duty, except that instead of one body it was tens of thousands.

All of the feeder streets had drained their loads of people into the central square. More continued to arrive in a steady stream as the number of the group grew. They seemed oblivious to the garish megatrons and word-crawls that flashed above them as they chatted, shook hands, and hugged. It was approximately 8:30 when an excited voice burst from Cavalino’s earpiece, blurting a message that instantly chilled him. “Windows opening! Weapons! Third, fourth floor windows!”

Nick’s eyes darted upward as he spun around to face the building he was standing near, simultaneously hearing the crack of rifle fire, hoping it

was their own rooftop and high-window snipers acting on the information and taking out some of the assailants. Behind him he heard the “WHOMP!” of a gas grenade exploding in the crowd, followed immediately by screams. Desperately scanning the windows immediately above him, he saw the large muzzle of a launcher emerge from a window two stories up. Ignoring his piece loaded with rubber-tipped rounds, he pulled his Glock and aimed upward, also shouting to the other officers nearest him. Whether it was a round from his clip or from one of the others who had quickly joined him in the barrage, he saw a flash of sparks from the muzzle, and the launcher dropped out of the window, falling to the sidewalk apparently before getting off a shot.

Cavalino shouted into the radio for backup and kicked open the ground-floor door in front of him. Ejecting the spent clip, he jammed a fresh one into the Glock while racing through the deserted shoe store, looking for a staircase. He could hear some of his men behind him as he burst into the back storeroom. Two men carrying AK-47s were rushing down the back stairs, heading for the rear exit, when they saw Cavalino. As both automatic weapons opened up, he dove to his side into a narrow aisle with floor-to-ceiling shelving filled with shoe boxes. Their rounds ricocheted off the floor and tore into the wood shelves and shoes. Nick could smell burned leather as he rolled back onto his feet and dashed to the far end of the aisle, hoping to circle around to the exit door. He keyed his mike and warned the officers who had been following him, instructing them to circle around to the back door and block the exit.

He reached the end of the aisle to find that it was a dead end. The shelving extended all the way to the masonry wall. The only way out was back to the center walkway, obviously being watched by the gunmen. Crouched low and creeping back to the middle of the storeroom, holding his pistol at arm’s length, Cavalino aimed it at what he guessed would be chest height, thankful that his backup had not burst through the stockroom doors behind him. He heard a soft message in his earpiece, telling him that they had the back door covered, and he clicked his mike twice to acknowledge.

The room was unnaturally quiet, compounded by his hearing loss that was a result of the twin blasts from the AK-47s and the fact that one ear was

filled with his transceiver. With his free hand he pulled the device out of his left ear, rotating the ear clip so that it would fit on his right, and switched it to the other side, hoping that it had protected his hearing enough to make a difference. It had, and it did. He immediately noticed a soft creaking of wood and looked up in time to see one of the gunmen ten feet above him, standing on top of the shelving racks, bringing his weapon to bear on Cavalino. Nick instantly realized that the gunman, who had climbed the back row and stepped over each intervening aisle until he found him, was only part of the trap. If he tried to run, the other man was undoubtedly covering the main aisle and would rip him to shreds. All of these thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant as he realized that he was trapped like a rat in a maze.

Knowing it was futile, Nick dove and rolled, hoping to get off a lucky shot as the machine gun peppered the narrow aisle. The first volley somehow missed, and Nick tried to bring his handgun in line for a shot, when he noticed that the gunman balanced on top of the shelving was wobbling, trying to regain the balance he had lost from the recoil of the gun. It was then that Nick noticed the shelving was only the width of two shoe boxes, maybe twenty-four inches deep and nearly ten feet high. Still lying on his back from the roll, he spun his feet around, bracing them against a vertical support while pressing his back against the opposite shelves. Pushing mightily, he failed in toppling the shelving but did get it to waver, the motion amplified at the top. The gunman, still trying to steady himself, suddenly fought the back and forth movement, arms flailing madly, somehow still retaining his grip on the gun.

Like a driver stuck in the mud and trying to rock the car out, Nick waited for the second sway of the shelving and pushed again, using the growing momentum. This time the unit swayed farther, and the gunman, unable to ride it, fell off, toppling down into the aisle next to Nick. Instantly, Nick swept shoe boxes off the second and third shelves, letting them scatter. He then reached through and pushed the farther ones into the other aisle, sticking his pistol and arm through the hole that he had made, followed by his head and shoulders. The gunman was scrambling to grab his weapon, obviously favoring his left arm, probably broken by the fall,

when Nick, twisting his wrist around to aim, pulled the trigger. His first round took the man in the forehead, which was only two or three feet away.

Not waiting to watch the gunman collapse, Cavalino pulled himself back out of the hole he had created in time to see that the other gunman had arrived at his aisle. A slight smile played across the bad man's face, and Nick realized there was no time to bring around his own weapon. Actually able to see the trigger finger tightening, Nick braced himself for the inevitable pain, when he simultaneously heard the chatter of another gun and saw the side of the gunman's head blown away. Obviously having entered abruptly through the door that Nick had used minutes earlier, two men in black SWAT gear approached the dead gunman and kicked his weapon away, while a third cautiously entered Nick's aisle, lowering his weapon upon recognition.

"Is there another?" the SWAT member asked.

Nick pointed his thumb at the next aisle and said, "Dead. Don't know if there are any more down here or upstairs. Only saw two."

The SWAT team checked out the rest of the stockroom before going up the stairs. Nick listened to the reassuring sounds of their routine…doors kicked open…shouts of "Clear" as they checked each room before they finally descended. He was content to let them do their job while he slowly stood and did some deep breathing, trying to neutralize the bombardment of adrenaline still pulsing through his body. His hands had nearly stopped shaking by the time they returned and reported that the rest of the premises were empty.

It was not until that moment that Nick noticed they were all wearing gas masks. A sudden panic caused his shakes to return as he asked, "Outside? What happened?"

The team leader, speaking through the mask, said, "Looks like about twenty teams, set up like this one. Second, third, and fourth floor windows. Canister launchers. You stopped this one. The snipers were able to get two others before they shot."

"So seventeen of the teams succeeded?"

The team leader only nodded.

"What'd they use?"

“Modified sarin.”

Cavalino suddenly felt very sick. Sarin gas was notoriously last used on a subway in Japan. The effects were horrible.

One of the other three unclipped a spare mask from his utility belt and handed it to Cavalino, along with the oxygen tank. Nick pulled it over his head and securely strapped it to his face. One of the others checked the cinches and connected the tank, strapping it to Nick’s belt. He did a quick positive-pressure test and nodded that it was working properly. Nick slowly walked through the stockroom door and the sales area toward the front. As he approached the windows, he saw bodies strewn across Times Square, none of them moving. His first thought was about Stanley Witherspoon. He wanted to find him, or actually he wanted to not find him. There were already HazMat crews on scene, thanks to the mobile command posts that had been dispatched hours ago. Nick could see them, clad in full airtight suits, stepping carefully through the bodies, desperation evident in their demeanor as they searched in vain for survivors. Nick was about to go out, when he felt a hand on his arm, restraining him.

“Sorry, sir.” Nick turned to see that it was the team leader. “We’re all stuck here inside this building until they can get full suits to us. The masks aren’t enough with this stuff.” Cavalino saw that the SWAT team or one of the crews from outside had already taped plastic over the door that he had kicked open, trying to protect the interior from what was outside.

Still staring out the windows, Cavalino asked, “What about my guys? They followed me in here to back me up.”

Even though the team leader’s face was completely obscured by the mask and his voice was muffled, Cavalino could still make out the emotion in his answer. “We caught the call for backup and happened to be about a hundred yards away. When we got here, your guys were covering the stockroom door, waiting for a break so they could go in to help you. When they got your call to go around back, we let them go and told them we’d cover this entrance. That was the last I saw them. They’ve been off the radio since then.”

Still staring through the window, Nick saw something that made his heart feel as if it would break. About fifty yards away, in the midst of the

fallen bodies, he spotted a bright pink Styrofoam chest, lying open on its side, the coffee urn and several Danish visible inside. The weight of failure felt as though it would crush him as he stumbled over to a shoe salesman's stool and collapsed. The three SWAT team members respectfully turned away as Nick's shoulders shook with sobs.

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Margo and Bill stared silently at the live video from Times Square, taken by a circling helicopter. The scene on the television was the worst nightmare for anyone having sworn to a job of protecting the public. Unable to stomach the inane comments from the news reporters, Burke had muted the sound.

"Not that it matters," Margo asked, "but does anyone have a count yet?"

"When I talked with our bureau chief a few minutes ago, he mentioned 18,000 as a rough figure." Burke's voice was bitter and subdued.

"Oh, my God." Margo sighed deeply. "What about the perps?"

"Nothing yet. Most of them got away in the chaos. The ones who didn't are dead. We're trying to work our way in and pick them up. If we can get them to a lab, maybe we can put together some IDs. The sarin gas is slowing us down."

"What about the rest of the country? Any more events coming together?"

"Don't know yet. There were several in the works…I just hope that this" – he gestured toward the television – "changes their minds."

As in any major situation, the Director's door was open. Staff had instructions to enter without knocking. Ricki Darling, deceptively named as her appearance and demeanor were all business, came in holding some papers. Ricki was the head of the domestic intelligence unit. It was her job to catch on to the Times Square plot before they could strike, and her failure weighed heavily, showing on her troubled face.

"Burke…Jackson," she said, nodding at both. It was her habit to address people by their last names. Margo suspected it was because that was how she organized information in her files, in her computer, and in her mind.

Bill was the first to acknowledge her. "What've you got, Ricki?"

"NSA picked this up a while ago…before the attack. No traces…no owners…disposable phones at both ends. Their signals went dead moments after the call, including the continuous signal between the phone and the system. They had been immediately disabled." She handed a copy of the transcript to each of them, keeping one for herself, rereading it for the thirtieth time, hoping to glimpse something new from the words.

Both Bill and Margo read the words, as well as the comments added by the intelligence officer who had caught the call from the computer that sifted through the thousands it picked up.

"*How about the hardware? In place and ready*," Margo read aloud.

"Ricki," said Bill, "I noticed by the IA's comments that one of the speakers on the call had an accent. Do we have a read on that yet?"

"No. European maybe. The language experts say he probably speaks several languages. There are, according to them, influences from more than a few in his words and sentence structure."

"Did you bring the recording?" Margo asked.

Ricki reached into her brown folder and pulled out a CD, handing it to Bill. Burke dropped it into the tray on his PC, clicked the mouse, and the phone call instantly issued from the speakers. The lab had cleaned up and enhanced the voices so well that they sounded as if they were in the room with the three of them. The matter-of-fact inflections gave all of them the chills when they considered the nature of the call.

"That voice sounds familiar," Margo said when it ended.

"Which one?" asked Burke.

"The accent. I know I've heard it before. I just can't place it."

"Anything in the backgrounds that would help?" asked Burke.

"No. We've run it through the wringer, and there's nothing."

"What else do you have, Ricki? We need some kind of break on this."

"I know, Burke, believe me. Nothing yet. Whoever they are, they're good at covering their tracks. I wish we had just one of the perps in custody and alive."

"Me, too," said Bill, looking disgusted at the direction the investigation was taking.

“The good news,” said Ricki, sounding no brighter, “is that the other planned meetings are falling apart…fast.”

Margo chimed in, “Nothing like it happening on this side of the ocean for people to believe it’s real.”

Ricki Darling left, and Bill Burke picked up his phone. Glancing at Margo, he explained, “I think I’d better check on Elohim’s flight…see how it’s going.”

As he punched the numbers, Margo responded quietly, “After seeing what happened on the steps of the State building yesterday, He’s the last one I’m worried about.”

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Whether it was the intensity of the previous day or the subtle thrum of the engines, everyone was asleep but Elohim who sat quietly, staring out his window. His eyes were not focused on the clouds or the ocean below, but darted about, in constant motion. As the events in New York had unfolded earlier, tears had welled up in his eyes. In the time that had passed since the massacre, the tears had dried, the eyelids had partially closed, revealing only slits, and the sadness had been replaced with a growing anger, gradually escalating until anyone awake would have recognized a complete, unadulterated fury on his face.

א

Brad Dillon watched the crawl at the bottom of the screen, spotting key stocks – “barometers,” as the trade liked to call them. The disaster at Times Square had closed the stock market. The mayor was essentially putting the whole city in lockdown mode, and Brad could almost feel the selling pressure build. The stock prices moving from right to left across the screen were frozen as a result of the closure, just displayed in an endless repeating loop of the last trade value. His regulars, even the clients who remained bullish during the worst situations, were dumping their portfolios. The bottom-feeders, the ones who smelled blood in the water and bought stocks

during a panic, profiting on other people's fear or misfortune, were nowhere to be found, which was the additional impetus that had driven the Dow down from 12,000 to 7,300 in the last twenty-four hours.

His attention flip-flopped between the financial information on one monitor in his office to the television screen. The news was also caught in an endless loop, showing nothing but the aerial view of the dead bodies in Times Square. Having long ago finished his stash of stale Winstons, Brad pulled a fresh pack from the new carton in his desk drawer and ripped the cellophane away. When his smoking had escalated from an evening indiscretion with no one around to a full-blown chain-smoking habit right at his desk, he had expected protests from the others in the offices, but none came. Certain he was busted when one of the senior partners dropped by to chat, he was instead surprised that the old timer bummed a cigarette and plopped on the rarely used couch to smoke with him.

One by one, the world markets east of New York announced their closings, attempting to hunker down and stanch the bleeding. Brad just assumed that the Asian markets would do the same. Other than take sell orders from the last of his clients which he could not act on until the markets reopened, there was not much for him to do. For the tenth time he checked the current gold price and again was amazed that it had nearly tripled since his purchase. Doing the math, he reconfirmed that he had now reached his self-imposed financial goal that just a few days ago still seemed years away. For some reason he did not understand, the thrill of attainment he always expected still did not come.

א

Mario Bonavente knelt praying before the small crucifix that rested upon the nightstand in his room at the Vatican. News of the early attacks in Europe had struck him like a piledriver, each successive one slamming him lower into a pit of despair. New York being his adopted home and Manhattan being the location of his first parish, the Times Square attack was more than he could bear. As he prayed, he could not help but wonder how many of his own flock had been among the group so viciously killed… upon how many of those now lifeless tongues he had placed the Blessed

Sacrament…how many of those now-departed souls had been bared to his ears in the confessional.

The Cardinal was unsure, as these thoughts filled his mind, whether God expected him to embrace them or force them out. Embracing them… vividly seeing and feeling the pain and sorrow…caused anger to well up within him, and he feared that, if left unchecked, the anger would consume him…would cause him to seek a wrong path. Struggling to force the images out of his mind felt like a betrayal to the faithful who had died. Torn by this dilemma, Mario Bonavente clenched his hands even tighter in prayer, his fingers screaming in pain, as he waited for God to give him guidance. His mind, for a moment, relinquished its grip on the agony and the trauma, reflecting that for once Mario Bonavente would receive his guidance from God in just a few hours and in person.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Reese had only seen pictures of the Sistine Chapel. Now that he actually stood before the frescoes, he felt a sense of awe and wonder fill him. Reynolds and McWilliams were also silently staring, moving slowly and reverently through one era to the next as the paintings told the stories of the time before Moses, the intermediate time from Moses to Christ, and the period that followed Christ.

Elohim stood before the altar, staring intently at Michelangelo's depiction of *The Last Judgment*, a massive work which covered the entire wall. The portrayal was clearly designed to evoke fear and awe in the viewer. Reese joined Elohim and asked, "How does looking at this make You feel?"

Elohim, surprised by the question, answered Reese without turning his gaze away from the work, "Predominantly, I feel sadness."

"Why is that?"

"It has always been my wish, my hope, that this event would be one of joy. I do not relish the fear that it has engendered in most. This is not the future of which my Son spoke."

"Isn't it a day of joy for the Chosen?"

Elohim closed his eyes, visualizing an unspoken image. After a moment he turned and faced Reese. "Have you felt joy? Has Claire?"

"No, not really. There has been a happiness born of vindication, as well as a desire to live without the bad, without the evil that seems to fill our days. Yet, at the same time, there is a cloud, a worry about the unknown. I suppose that Heaven still seems too foreign to us, impossible to visualize."

"Would you like to visualize Heaven?"

"Yes. Yes, I would."

"It's quite easy. Think back to the last perfect day you had. A day of comfort and love. A day of stimulation and pleasure, where nothing unpleasant intruded."

Reese thought for a moment. He recalled a recent day, just after moving his family to Tucson, when they had decided to explore their new

environment. Traveling the winding road to Mount Lemmon, he and Claire, Melissa, and Matthew marveled at the scenery and animals all so new to them. As it was a workday for most, the picnic area they chose was nearly deserted. The air was fresh, and the view of the valley was breathtaking. His family spent the hours laughing and talking, playing catch with a frisbee, and taking short hikes. Claire spread a thick blanket on the pine needles and read. Throughout it all there was not a single nick or scrape, not a spoiled morsel of food, not a loud or belligerent stranger. As the sky darkened and they began their drive back down the mountain, all four were quiet, not from exhaustion but from sadness that the day had come to an end.

Elohim, looking deeply into Reese's eyes at the end of his reverie, said, "Now imagine your next day being just as wonderful, just as fulfilling, just as happy, with none of the bad which dominates so much of your lives. And then imagine each day after as the same."

"As perfect as that day was, a lifetime of trips to Mount Lemmon would soon pale."

"Heaven is full of every imaginable wonder, from beautiful mountains to magnificent cities. You found a happy day on Earth because you escaped from the others for a time. You were able to hide from them by finding a secluded bit of land. Your other perfect days were all the same and yet different. One was a day on the ocean, another in a mountain cabin. The common thread is that you escaped from those who infringe upon your happiness; you found a place where they did not intrude. There is no monotony in Heaven, only a permanent respite from the people and things you would prefer not to see."

"Every day is a vacation?"

"No. You may work. You, my friend, will work, but it will be only for the satisfaction that work brings. Reese, you love to teach. There are multitudes in Heaven who wish to learn from you. The difference is that all of your students will be in your class because they want to be there, want to hear what you have to say."

Reese could see a glimpse of what Elohim described. He was able to place himself there and began to believe he could be happy in such a place. "But what about the children? Matthew and Melissa?"

Elohim smiled. “They will find it the easiest, having not yet given in to the realities of life on Earth. It is the natural tendency of the young to attempt to create a Heaven-like existence here where their days are filled with friendships and pleasing activities. Only the necessities of society divert them from this life and force them into another direction, a direction of immersion into the not-so-pleasant. Reality requires that they grow up, and growing up means abandoning much of what brings you joy, simply so you can survive.”

Reese, puzzled, asked, “I thought that self-centeredness and hedonism were the opposite of what was welcomed into Heaven. Children and teenagers are very nearly defined by those traits.”

“That is certainly true of smaller children who are incapable of sharing a toy. But by the time good people such as Matthew and Melissa reach their teen years, they crave sharing…they intensely wish to contribute to the group. Nowhere will you find a more pure desire to give and to help than in people of this type. After America suffered through the damage from Hurricane Katrina, charitable adults gave money for the rebuilding of the homes damaged, but it was the younger among you who individually gave hundreds of hours of time organizing events and soliciting donations. And surely, Reese, there can be no more unambiguous example of self-sacrifice than the young men and women who put on your country’s uniform and offer their very lives for an ideal, for the good of the whole. Your sociologists have theorized that youths are the ideal candidates for armies because the young do not believe they will die. This is not the case. They are willing to fight…and to die…because their pure beliefs have not been replaced with mature cynicism.

“The hedonism and self-centeredness you witness among so many of the young are symptoms of their resistance to giving in to the vicissitudes of life on Earth, their opposition to surrendering the dream of a perfect life without compromise. I know this is a difficult premise for you to personally embrace, Reese, as your childhood was far from ideal, but for most who have reached their middle to late years, the images of happiness which comfort them are from their youth. That which youths love and that which

they crave are in abundance in Heaven. That which they struggle to avoid does not exist there.

"It is answering your question about youth that brings us closer to an understanding of Heaven. Your day on the mountain, your day on the ocean or in the cabin, those days that best describe a perfect day…are they not typical of every day that teens strive to create?"

Smiling, Reese answered, "You're right. I can't tell you how many times I've actually felt a slight twinge of resentment when I'm fighting a deadline and juggling two courses while Matthew and Melissa are piling into a car for a day at the park."

"In Heaven, you would be free to join them."

Laughing softly, Reese replied, "If it's Heaven for them, they may not want Dad along."

They both heard the clacking of footsteps on the marble floor, coming from beyond the transenna which separated the main room from the smaller room of the faithful. They turned to see Cardinal Bonavente hurriedly enter, pausing to genuflect before resuming his rapid pace.

"Elohim, bless You." The Cardinal suddenly stopped and turned slightly red. "Forgive my presumptuousness. Old habits are hard to break. May You find it in Your heart to bless us this day."

Elohim smiled at Mario and answered, "What is in your heart matters much more than what passes your lips. I am, in fact, honored to receive your blessing."

The five of them gathered in a small circle in front of the altar which, shortly before Columbus sailed to America, had been dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. They spoke in soft, respectful tones.

Bonavente continued, "His Holiness begs Your forgiveness for the delay and will join us in a moment. I am afraid the Swiss Guard, in their zeal not to allow a repeat of the travesties which have been occurring around the world, have confused our plans for Your arrival. It was the Pope's wish that he meet with You in his private apartment; instead, You were escorted here."

"A fortuitous choice," replied Elohim, waving his arm to encompass the great works of art, "otherwise I would not have had the opportunity to enjoy

these works."

McWilliams asked, "I would have thought You had seen them before?"

"And I have. I have seen all of them, but only through the eyes of others, just as you have seen them in photographs and film. None of these images are new to you, yet do you not appreciate them all the more as you stand before them?"

Craig was about to respond, when more brisk footfalls were heard. Turning again to the opening at the side, they saw the Pope enter. He arrived without the customary entourage and was wearing a simple white robe that reached the tile floor and swirled around his feet as he walked. He, also, paused at the entrance to the main chapel and, rather than genuflecting quickly as the Cardinal had done, dropped to both knees, gently touched his forehead, then his heart, followed by each of his shoulders. He then firmly clasped his hands in prayer and closed his eyes.

As the Pope prayed, Elohim walked forward, leaving the others where they stood. In twenty paces he reached the Pontiff and removed the white skull cap from his head. The Pope did not move, did not open his eyes, and continued to pray. Bonavente, Reese, McWilliams, and Reynolds stood transfixed as Elohim slowly bent forward and gently kissed the top of the Pope's head.

At the moment of Elohim's touch, the Pope's body became rigid, as if every muscle was clenched, the only movement being a trembling of his hands clasped in prayer. After a few moments passed, Elohim stood. The kneeling Bishop of Rome reacted to the removal of the touch by collapsing to the floor, motionless. Cardinal Bonavente, snapped from his trance, bolted forward to help his friend, when Elohim turned to him and with a subtle motion stopped him. Turning back to the prone figure, Elohim held one hand out, not extended to the Pope but to his side. They all witnessed a slight brightening of the air just inches from Elohim's fingertips. The brightening intensified and expanded both sideways and vertically, reaching the floor.

The light changed to become crystalline. No longer diffuse, the bright glow transformed into a million distinct specks of light, shimmering next to Elohim, the points moving and swirling like a cloud of fireflies. The

pinpoints of light, resembling pixels, continued to swirl and rearrange, resolving into the shape of a man, and then they began to dim. As they did, and the eyes of the watchers adjusted, there appeared a man where none had been a moment before. He wore a brown robe, closely matching the color of his thick hair and beard, and turned to embrace Elohim. The others heard him say, "I have missed You, my Father."

Reese, under his breath, said to the Cardinal, "Is that Jesus?"

Bonavente, speechless, simply spread his hands in wonderment, shaking his head. Elohim turned to them and answered, "This is Peter, my Son's beloved friend." Turning, he said to Peter, "Go to your vessel."

The robed saint knelt next to the Pope and gently touched his shoulder. Responding immediately, the old man's eyes fluttered open, tears filling them, and he rose to his feet, helped by Peter. Elohim, addressing the others, said, "Come. Meet the maker of your Church."

Mario Bonavente was the first to move, nearly running to join them. Nicholas, Craig, and Reese followed. Bonavente knelt before his saint, only to be taken by the hand and raised back to his feet. "Mario," Peter said, "it is wonderful to behold you with my own eyes on such a momentous occasion."

The Cardinal was speechless, still gripping Peter's hand tightly and smiling. Reese looked at the Pope who was standing beside Peter. His tears were gone, and his face shone with a serenity and happiness that was unmistakable. Peter turned to the others one by one and, with his free hand, grasped their hands, speaking their names and giving each of them a blessing. Reese, after receiving his blessing from Peter, watched him speak to Nicholas and noticed something for the first time. When Peter finished addressing them all, Reese asked, "You're speaking Aramaic, aren't you?"

Turning back to Reese, he answered, "I am. It is my language."

"But we can understand you, and you us?"

A smile filled Peter's face, and looking into his eyes, Reese could understand how this man could have been responsible for founding a church which had survived for more than two millennia. Peter responded, "In the presence of Our Father there can be no misunderstanding and no barriers between us."

Craig asked, “When you first, uh, arrived, you told Elohim that you have missed Him. I don’t understand. Haven’t you been in Heaven?”

Before Peter could answer, Reese said, “Of course! You never left. The teachings are literal.”

“Yes, Reese, it is true. I made a promise to our Lord, Jesus Christ, that I would not abandon the flock.”

“But where have you been?” asked Craig, still not understanding.

Again, Reese responded, “He has lived within and through the popes, all of them.”

“It is true,” Elohim affirmed. “Peter chose to remain behind, to willingly and lovingly forsake his right to an honored place in Heaven so that the teachings of my Son would live on through the ages.”

Reynolds asked, “How could that be? I mean, from what I’ve read, some of the popes in the past were less than perfect.”

Peter answered, “That is true. And watching the events unfold was saddening beyond description. Yet I was only a voice in their minds and in their hearts. It was not the wish of Jesus for me to control them, only to advise. Some choose to ignore the voice and pursue other, more temporal rewards. Others” – he said, lifting the still-gripping hand of the Pope – “have served our Lord well.”

The Pontiff smiled broadly. “Thank you, blessed Peter, for your kind words. I pray that I will be allowed many more days on Earth to fulfill my destiny as your servant.”

Cardinal Bonavente, alarmed, spoke urgently. “Your Holiness! You have the mark! It is your destiny to go to Heaven.”

Finally releasing his grip from Peter’s hand, the Pope grasped the Cardinal by both shoulders and said, “Do you not see, my friend Mario? Peter not only resides within me, I reside within him. His promise to our Lord to remain here as long as there are souls to guide is my promise, as well.”

“Then,” asked Mario, “after you have drawn your last breath, will you join us?”

The Pope looked into the hopeful eyes of his longtime friend. “Mario, I am certain there is a young priest somewhere in the world who, after I have

died, might benefit from my advice." Ignoring the sadness filling Bonavente's face, the Pope turned to Elohim and asked, "Is there not such a young man?"

Elohim only nodded.

Taking a deep breath, the Cardinal began to speak and was cut off by his old friend. "I do not wish to hear from you that you, too, will stay behind."

"But it is so."

"It cannot be."

"Why? As you have said, there is much left to be done."

"And there are many here to do it. I would presume that your mother and your father await in Heaven, as do many others who love you so. They wait for you. To not join them would be cruel and would tempt others to stay behind, as well."

"Do you not have many who yearn for your presence in Heaven?"

"Perhaps I do, but I have freely made a pact – a pact with our Lord, one that cannot be broken. You must remember, Mario, that Heaven is eternal, and mankind is surely not. Someday I will join you, and it will seem to you like the blink of an eye."

Bonavente stood silently, studying the face of his old friend, hoping that he would waver in his resolve and knowing that he would not. The Pope hugged Mario, and the two held each other tightly. Ending the embrace, the Pope turned to Elohim and said, "Thank You, my Father. Today You have given me a great gift. And I, in turn, have a gift for You."

Reaching into the thick folds of his robe, the Pope pulled out a wooden box. Reese could see a carving of a rose on the lid as the Pope offered the box to Elohim. Peter smiled at the sight of it while Elohim took it in his hands. When Elohim turned the box in his grip, Reese saw an opening on the side, an opening that appeared to be a keyhole.

"I retrieved the box from the coffin of Saint Peter," said the Pope. "He has held it for You all of these years. I have been told" – he glanced at Peter and smiled – "that You, Elohim, possess the only key, brought to You in Heaven by Your Son when He resurrected from this Earth."

"I do," said Elohim, reaching into his pocket and bringing out a large golden key with a sparkling crystal mounted to the tip. He handed the box

back to the Pope who held it while Elohim inserted the crystal into the keyhole. Without so much as a slight turn, the lid of the box opened, its contents revealed only to Elohim. Looking inside, he said, “There is a gift for me,” and removed a golden chalice.

Peter said, “It is the chalice from our last meal with Your Son, the chalice from which we had all partaken of His blood.”

“The Holy Grail!” exclaimed McWilliams incredulously.

Elohim turned to Craig. “The Holy Grail has been many things to many people. This chalice is what it is, the final remnant of my Son’s life on Earth.” With this statement, Elohim tipped the chalice and a brilliant, red liquid began to spill out onto the marble floor.

Peter quickly reached forward so that it would stream through his fingers. “It is the blood of our Lord.”

Holding the chalice upright, stopping the flow, Elohim said, “There seems to be something else in the box. It is a gift for you.” He turned the box so that the Pontiff could see inside.

Within the box, lying upon a gray, rumpled fabric, was a snow white sheet of parchment, untouched by time, folded once. The Pope removed it from the box, and as he unfolded it, his eyes widened. Turning to Peter, he asked, “Is this…?”

Peter answered, “It is. It is in the hand of Jesus.”

To the group, the Pope read the message, “*Behold, before you stands my Father*. It is signed, *Jesus of Nazareth*.”

The parchment trembled in his hands as the Pope slowly laid it back upon the gray cloth. Peter explained, “That is the shawl of His mother, Mary. He told me it was Her shawl which She used to wrap Him, as an infant, before putting Him down to sleep on the straw. He carried it throughout His life as a remembrance of Her protective love.”

Elohim said, “My child, it would be most fitting that, in this church consecrated and dedicated to Her, the shawl be kept upon the altar.”

Handing the parchment to Bonavente, the Pope removed the gray cloth from the bottom of the box and took it to the main altar. Kneeling before the crucifix, he paused to say a prayer before reverently placing it upon the marble.

The old man backed away from the altar before finally turning to join the gathering. Wistfully, he said, “I fear we have much work to be done.”

“You are right,” said Elohim. He faced Peter and smiled ruefully. “I give you my love and the love of my Son.” He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around the saint.

They all heard Peter say, “And mine to You and to Your Son,” and then he was gone. At the same moment the Pope straightened slightly, and the worried expression left his face, replaced with one of comfort and serenity.

Speaking to Elohim, he said, “Can You forgive me, my Father, for permitting so many to stray from the flock before reaching the Gates of Heaven?”

“There can be no forgiveness, for there has been no offense. All of the souls on Earth are your sheep, and you are the shepherd; yet, this is only a metaphor. My children, all men and women who breathe this air, are not to follow blindly any god or any man. If they follow, it must be of their choice; their eyes must be open as well as their minds and hearts. It is your role to preach, but not to unwilling ears. It is your duty to answer, but only if the question is posed. It is your obligation to those who are lost to burn a candle in the window. The servants of my Son were not intended to stand in the city square and exhort, but to sit on the bench and explain.

“Your Church has sent missionaries to every corner of the Earth, as have many others. Some of them have attempted to coerce and browbeat those to whom they had been sent to minister, in an attempt to convert. This is not the way of my Son. Yet many others, upon arriving, tended to the wounds and the diseases of the villagers, helping them grow their food, sharing with them the techniques of science so they could live a less strife-ridden life, and brokering their conflicts to peaceful resolutions. After they did these things, some in the village inquired of their faith. It was then, *and only then*, that they shared the wonder of the teachings of my Son. That is His way.”

“I understand, my Father. And where else do we fail?”

“When I arrived a few days ago, I walked the streets of America. It was there that I found something that made me most sad.”

Mario Bonavente asked, “What was that, my Father?”

“I came upon a beautiful church, built with great love for my Son. Wishing to be embraced by this love, I attempted to enter only to find that the doors were locked.”

The Cardinal explained quickly, “If they remain unlocked, there is much damage; so many times the sanctity of the altar is violated….”

“It is your mission to guide the lost, not protect your possessions!” For the first time since their arrival at the chapel, Reese saw displeasure showing on Elohim’s face. Mario and the Pope saw it, as well. “The sanctity of the church is only violated when a lock is placed on the doors. Let a thousand vandals in before you keep out one lost soul in need of comfort. Would my Son have you build a sanctuary, only to lock out the troubled among you?” Elohim’s voice had risen in volume and intensity. Striding to an alcove which held a small statue of the Virgin Mary, he turned to the Cardinal and Pope and said, “Have these objects become more important to you than a single soul?”

As he spoke, his arm swept the statue from the ledge. It fell to the floor and shattered, the crash echoing off the walls. “If they have, your feelings have gone beyond respect and have become idol worship.”

All were stunned to silence. The expressions of Bonavente and the Pope were of someone stricken. Elohim, calming his voice, continued, “If those who are filled with anger damage your churches during the night, the faithful must awaken each day and repair them. If those filled with hate and contempt destroy your churches, then the faithful must rebuild them. And so it must be for each new morning, for to not have done so has wrought a lasting damage upon the hearts of many. And there is no brick, no glass, no precious metal on Earth that has more worth than a single man or woman. If you know, with certainty, that an unlocked church will be entered during the night by a vandal, my question to you is this: why is there not a priest waiting inside to greet him?”

Cardinal Bonavente looked stricken. “My Father, I am most sorry that these lessons, so well taught by Your Son, must now be relearned.”

Elohim saw the pain in their eyes. Softening his brow, he said, “I know there is love in your hearts, and the good that you both have done is nearly immeasurable. Yet, during the coming days, weeks, and months, there will

be strife as your servants have never seen. Their skills, their courage, their faith, and the very depths of their souls will be tested in the onslaught ahead. If the past is any measure of the future, I can tell you that most of your Church will fall by the wayside, trampled by the hoards of empty vessels which seek to dominate the world. Only a few will remain to carry forth the candle, the message, the truth. There have been far too many men of the cloth who have believed that the best course when facing evil is to hide behind locked doors. The lesson they have not yet learned is that when you hide from evil, your refuge becomes your cage."

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Reese trailed behind the rest of his group as they departed for the car. The Pope and Bonavente had escorted them out and were standing on the steps of the chapel as Reese turned and walked back to them.

"You looked troubled, my son," said the Pope.

Glancing over his shoulder and seeing the others climbing into the car, Reese turned back and said, "Cardinal Bonavente, when we spoke in Washington, we discussed the possibility of…the need for an…."

"Exorcism," Mario answered, sensing his discomfort.

"Yes. In light of the way this visit went, it seems foolish to broach the subject."

The Pope reached forward and clasped Reese's hand. "My son, there are times in our lives when certainty is impossible. There are also times when being 'right' is not as important as being true to yourself. If this man who calls himself Elohim – this man who has performed the wonders you have beheld, this man who has touched your soul and brought you great joy – is indeed Lucifer, no ceremony that we can perform is a match for him. If, on the other hand, He is our Lord, our Creator, and our Father, which I believe Him to be, I cannot bear the thought of subjecting Him to the ritual."

Reese stared deeply into the eyes of the Pope, seeing the unmistakable fire of absolute belief burning brightly. Turning his gaze to Bonavente, Reese saw the Cardinal smile and nod in agreement, adding, "Reese, I believe that it is best for you to decide what you believe, and then rely upon it."

Reese nodded, saying, “You’re right, both of you. Besides, what would we accomplish either way?”

Reese hesitated for another moment. He then knelt down and kissed the ring of the Pope. Standing, he said, “Thank you.”

“For what do you thank me?” asked the Pope.

“I don’t really know,” Reese answered.

א

The return drive to Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport was silent, as all were lost in their own thoughts until they approached the tarmac, when Reynolds said, “I felt as though I was eavesdropping on someone else’s performance review back there.”

Reese and Craig stared at Reynolds, taken aback by his comment, as Elohim explained, “Even the best horse requires the feel of the spur at times.”

א

The rest of the second day passed with a minimum of incidents, the massacre in Times Square causing most to pause for a time. Millions of people reeled from the reality of the evil act. The news organizations pandered to this public obsession by providing uninterrupted coverage of the event, including graphic presentations by pathologists showing the effects of sarin gas on the human body. The names and brief biographies of the dead were presented as an ongoing crawl across the bottoms of TV screens on each channel.

The FBI was not forthcoming with clues or suspects to feed the insatiable appetite of the media, leaving them to repeatedly parade the same experts-hired-as-consultants who found increasingly creative ways to say that they knew nothing.

The reporters were able to discover from an unnamed source at the New York Police Department, who was involved in the process of gathering and bagging the deceased, that the majority of those killed did not have the

mark. This created an entirely new direction for the coverage to take into the evening and night, with numerous psychologists brought in to explain the motivation of those not chosen who had joined the gathering.

No one within the FBI or the Vatican leaked the news about Elohim's visit to the Pope. The media clearly expected Elohim to publicly respond to the morning attack, and the question as to Elohim's whereabouts had been posed countless times during the day, with both the State Department and the FBI answering only with a "No comment" response. With the lack of success in finding Elohim, the news channels then sought to find Reese Johnson, again with no result. Speaking to staff, who preferred to remain off-camera, they were able to determine that Reese and Claire Johnson as well as their two children were staying at the Watergate and had not been seen leaving their suites all day. The unnamed staff employee at the Watergate also told the reporters that when she took meals to the Johnsons during the day, Reese Johnson was not present, and only three meals were delivered each time. Shortly after this broadcast Shirley Gonzales, a room service attendant at the Watergate, was terminated.

A priority list of sought-after interviews was topped by Elohim. The media's second choice, Reese Johnson, also unavailable, was then followed by any of the others who had participated in Elohim's televised statement. No reporters succeeded in locating Craig McWilliams or Nicholas Reynolds. Margo Jackson had sequestered herself inside the Hoover building and was also unavailable. Bill Burke was similarly unavailable. Walter Penfield, immediately after the statement, had flown home to California, rejoining his family, and was refusing interviews, as well. Archbishop Coughlin's illness continued, and Cardinal Bonavente was not to be found. Rabbi Leo Schmidt held out their only hope as he promised to appear in the near future. As a result, cable and airwaves were filled with discussions among those with no firsthand information.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The aroma of frying bacon escaped through the open french doors of the second-story balcony, triggering hunger pangs in Walter Penfield. He sipped his coffee and looked down at the morning traffic on Lake Boulevard in Pasadena. Doris called out to him, “Honey, do you want to eat out there, or are you coming in?”

“Out here,” he answered. “I’ll come help.”

He went inside as she was sliding the two breakfast plates onto a tray which already held a third plate of toasted English muffins, a pot of jam, and a white porcelain carafe filled with coffee. Penfield grabbed the tray and turned to carry it out, when their doorbell rang. “Who would that be this early?” he asked. “It’s barely seven.”

“I’ll go check. Go ahead,” Doris answered.

Walter Penfield took the food to the balcony, removing the plates of bacon and eggs from the tray and arranging them on cloth place mats. He then put the plate of muffins in the middle of the table, as well as the coffee and jam, and headed back inside with the empty tray. Stepping inside, he found Doris coming toward the patio with a man Walter did not know, but who looked familiar.

Smiling, she said, “Walter. This is Randolph Duncan.”

“Of course, Professor Duncan,” Penfield acknowledged. “I thought I recognized you.”

“I am very sorry to intrude,” Duncan apologized, noticing the breakfast set out on the veranda behind Penfield. “And it looks as though I’ve interrupted your breakfast. I’ll come back.”

“No, please stay,” Doris urged, always the gracious host. “Join us for breakfast.”

“I can’t, really. I feel bad….”

“Professor Duncan, I insist. It’s only bacon and eggs. We have plenty of muffins and coffee. You and Walter start eating. I already have extra bacon made, I’ll fry some eggs and join you in a minute.”

Walter joined in the process of persuasion. “Come on. Let’s go out and eat. We’ve received our orders.”

Feigning reluctance but obviously glad to join them, Duncan answered, “Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Please, both of you must stop calling me Professor. It’s Randolph or Randy, whichever you prefer.”

“Randolph, it is,” said Penfield. “And this morning I’ll be Walter,” he added with a chuckle.

They both sat, and Penfield immediately snatched a buttered muffin from the plate, liberally applying strawberry jam. Duncan followed suit. “This is one of the joys of Elohim’s news,” said Walter.

“What’s that?” Duncan asked.

“Before all of this, Doris and I were each having a bran muffin and yogurt for breakfast, and meals with low fat and no refined sugar or flour for lunch and dinner. The first thing I did when I came home from Washington, D.C. was throw away everything in the house that had the word *organic* on it.”

Randolph Duncan let out a laugh, saying as it subsided, “That’s the first laugh I’ve had since this whole thing began.”

“Why is that?” Penfield took a bite of bacon.

“Well, I don’t know your private positions, but publicly you’ve always straddled the fence with regard to religion and God. I’ve publicly staked my whole reputation on the premise that there is no God. Now, with what’s happening, I kind of feel as if the revolution is over, and I backed the wrong candidate for king.”

“Waiting for the new guy’s troops to arrive at your door for your beheading?”

“Figuratively, yes.” Duncan hesitated, then added, “Well, maybe not so figuratively.”

“Are you truly afraid?”

Randolph Duncan considered the question before answering, “I do feel a fear. I can’t quite put my finger on it, can’t explain it.”

“Then it doesn’t exist,” Penfield said flatly.

Not expecting that response, Duncan asked, “Why do you say that?”

“Hasn’t that been the overriding theme of your statements for the last two decades? If you can’t explain it, it doesn’t exist?”

Duncan stared at Penfield’s face, trying to detect the presence of malice. Instead, he only saw genuine curiosity and a sincere friendliness. “I guess I’m a bit oversensitive and defensive. My first reaction to your comment was to lash out.”

“That’s hardly the scientific method,” replied Walter, between bites of bacon. “I was just trying to illustrate a point. It makes it difficult to discuss anything intelligently when some of the doors are slammed and nailed shut.”

Duncan decided to roll the dice with Walter Penfield. “That’s essentially the point of my visit: how can the existence of God be intelligently discussed? And before you respond, please know that I don’t mean for that question to sound as harsh and condescending as I know it does.”

Before Walter could answer, Doris arrived, carrying her plate of bacon and eggs, and said, “It’s the six-hundred-pound gorilla.”

Penfield just smiled, as Duncan asked, “Excuse me?”

Sitting down and applying jam to her own muffin, she answered, “Randolph, don’t you remember the old joke? ‘Where does a six-hundred-pound gorilla sit? Wherever he wants.’ That’s God. He’s always been the six-hundred-pound gorilla. And throughout eternity he’s always done what he wants. So the question is not this: how do we discuss Him intelligently? The question really is this: how can we go on having intelligent conversations while trying to ignore the six-hundred-pound gorilla in our midst?”

“Gorilla in our midst, ha!” said Walter, laughing.

“I couldn’t resist,” she responded, smiling playfully before continuing. “That’s what you’ve been trying to do for most of your life, pretend that He didn’t exist while evidence that He did was beating you over the head.”

“Do you really think that’s the case? That we’ve been ignoring the evidence?”

Walter answered, “The history of science is full of it.”

“Science is full of it, all right!” Doris quipped.

Walter and Doris both laughed, leaving Duncan to feel that it was at his expense. “Look, Randolph,” Walter said, “you can’t even laugh about it. That’s part of the problem. You and I…all of us have taken ourselves far too seriously. And the danger of doing so is that we start to feel like high priests of science, instead of guys who are just trying their best to figure it all out. Yes, scientists do ignore evidence if it doesn’t fit with their theories. That’s been the pattern forever. I don’t need to go back as far as Copernicus to illustrate it. All of the fields are guilty…medicine, astronomy, physics, biology, even mathematics.”

“How can that be with math?”

“One would think it couldn’t. One plus one equals two, right? The problem is that mathematicians felt hemmed-in by reality-based math. When you start creating mathematical representations of reality, math becomes subverted. Reality has limitations that are governed by laws. Math, in the application of models, doesn’t.” Penfield took a muffin from the platter and, holding it out next to the table, let it drop. It fell to the patio deck. He explained, “In reality, you drop the English muffin, it falls to the deck. In math, once I’ve created a ‘model’ that represents all of the forces at work, I can make the muffin hover, fly sideways, shoot out into space, or disappear into another dimension. Math doesn’t care. If I’m good enough at it, I can make math prove that the muffin will do any one of those things, instead of simply falling down.”

“Too bad you didn’t run those calculations before you dropped it,” Doris said. “Now our reality is going to get ants.”

Shaking his head, Walter bent and picked up the muffin, wiping the butter from the deck with a napkin as he continued, “I hope I’m quoting Ronald Reagan accurately. He once said that the definition of an economist is someone who tries to prove in theory that which occurs in reality. That concept describes far too much of what we do. But the problem is that once we develop our models, we succumb to the temptation to play God. We are like a little boy with a toy town; he sees no reason to stick to the rules of nature. He can make anything happen that he wants.”

“You’re saying that scientists play God? Isn’t that a cliché right out of science fiction movies from the 1950s?”

“Randolph, isn’t it a cliché for a reason? I think it’s human nature. I have a friend who’s an architect. He tells me that all the architects he knows wish they were builders, including himself. Their egos force them to maintain the position of architect, because society has created a caste system that places the architect above the contractor, and they don’t want to give up the prestige. The problem is, when an architect is finished with what he does, he has a rolled-up set of plans on a shelf or, worse yet, a bunch of electronic bytes stored on a hard drive. When the contractor is done, he has a building. My friend calls it production-envy. And architects aren’t the only ones to suffer from this. What does a lawyer have to show for his entire career? A whole room full of papers?”

“And a lot of miserable people,” added Doris.

“Unless he’s in criminal law. Then either he has people who are locked up or he has people who have avoided getting locked up – hardly a body of work that engenders a feeling of accomplishment. Same thing with accountants. Other people are actually producing something, and the accountant has spent his or her life counting it for them. The list goes on: reporters who watch what happens, insurance agents and underwriters, appraisers, bureaucrats, bankers….”

“And scientists?” asked Duncan.

“Yes. And scientists.”

“But science does create. So much of what we have today is a result of the science that was done in the past.”

“You’re confusing scientists with engineers. All of the infrastructure we have, all of the gadgets and gizmos that we enjoy were made *real* by engineers, not scientists; the scientists only created the concept – just as the architect’s plans are made real by the builder with the help of engineers. Architects, especially the current avant-garde architects, draw their buildings without regard for the laws of gravity or the effect of winds, earthquakes, or any of the other things that can make a building fall down and kill people. They then turn the drawings over to a structural engineer who figures out a way to translate them from the abstract to the possible. If you talk to builders or structural engineers, they’ll tell you that it almost

seems as if some architects resent the laws of nature because those laws place limitations on them."

"Isn't that a good thing?" asked Duncan. "We need dreamers who think, forgive me for using another cliché, outside the box. That's the source for some of the most exciting new things in the world."

"That's true," Walter said. "Had Frank Lloyd Wright not visualized cantilevered designs and forced engineers to figure out the ways and means to make his designs work, we would not have received the benefit of his vision. There is a similar parallel between physicists and theoretical physicists. Einstein sat and stared, creating a theory. Afterward, thousands of physicists spent decades trying to prove, or disprove, the theory. But, Duncan, how many Einsteins or Wrights have there really been?

"And I mis-spoke a moment ago when I said that the concept was created by scientists. Scientists are human, and as Elohim explained to us, all humans participate in the creation of our reality. However, scientists, when solely in the act of plying their trade, create nothing; they only discover that which is already there. The problem begins when the scientist, just because he discovers something, takes credit for its existence. When Columbus discovered America, he didn't take credit for creating it."

"Oh, come on, Walter. Scientists don't take credit for what they find."

"The Doppler Effect, the Van Allen Belt, Einstein-Bose Condensate, Hawking Radiation, Hubble Constant…the list goes on."

"That's not taking credit for its existence."

"It's not? Many years ago, when scientists were a humbler lot, the nomenclature was a bit different. It was Bernoulli's Principle, not the Bernoulli Effect. And we had the Archimedes Principle, not the Archimedes Displacement. There was the Archimedes Screw, but that's okay because he conceived of it, drew a practical design, and then actually built it. It is not Doppler's effect, not Van Allen's belt, not Mr. Einstein's or Mr. Bose's condensate, not Stephen's radiation, and Edwin had nothing to do with creating the Hubble constant. All of those things were created by another, and putting their names on them is plagiarism."

"Another? You mean God?"

"*I*," Walter said, emphasizing the word, "might mean God. Another person may choose to believe that they are all natural processes. It's irrelevant. The fact is that each of the phenomena existed long before it was discovered and will continue to exist long after we are all gone. We run into problems when scientists, feeling a need to be not just observers but a part of the process, set themselves up as arbiters of what we all must think. Whether someone in the rest of the world finds a plant that cures a disease or whether tens of thousands of people see a UFO, scientists, in their arrogance, do not acknowledge it as real until they have confirmed it. It's almost as if, once they have decided what is the truth, all other beliefs must be banished.

"Whether it's the existence of God or the appropriate designation for Pluto, a group of like-minded scientists get together for a meeting, issue a statement, pat each other on their backs for how brilliant they are, and become outraged when people continue to call Pluto a planet or when parents continue to teach their *own children* that there is a God. And there is never…never a valid representative of the opposing point of view present. You attended the symposium in La Jolla entitled *Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason, and Survival*, didn't you?"

Duncan nodded.

"There were three questions to be addressed." As Penfield talked, he counted off the items on his fingers. "Should science do away with religion? What would science put in religion's place? Can we be 'good' without religion? Putting aside for a moment the monstrous ego necessary to set themselves up as the appropriate judge of these issues, tell me, Randolph, were there any clergy in attendance, any theologians?"

"Of course not."

"Would you have a symposium to discuss doing away with health care and not invite a single doctor?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Obviously, we would have doctors present."

"Why doctors for health care and not priests for religion?"

"Doctors are scientists."

"And only a scientist can possibly have something valid to say? Randolph, are you listening to yourself?"

“Wait a minute!” said Duncan, getting defensive. “Scientists are trained to deal with the facts, the truth, not beliefs. You can’t have a reasoned discussion, with faith and emotion as the core of the differing opinion.”

“And you actually believe there is no faith or emotion within our group? Is it not only faith that someday the mystery of consciousness will be solved? Was there not emotion at the symposium when Neil deGrasse Tyson, referring to the U.S. National Academy of Science polls showing that fifteen percent of the participating scientists still believed in God, identified the believers as a problem and a group that needed to be investigated?”

“There were others present who defended religion.”

“There were scientists present to defend religion, not qualified representatives of the faiths. It is as absurd and patently biased as a meeting of evangelicals to decide whether to do away with science, without a single scientist in attendance.”

“There have been such meetings by evangelicals!”

“I know that, Randolph. That’s my point. What was the outcome of those meetings?”

“To abolish the teaching of evolution in schools, take the classroom back to the days prior to the Scopes trial.”

“The fanatics within religion urge abolishment of the teaching of evolution, so the *reasoned, scientific* response is to insist upon the abolishment of creationism? How is your reaction any less fanatical than theirs? The mainstream religions – the Jews, the Catholics, and the vast majority of the Protestant faiths – all have come out officially separating themselves from the fanatics, asking only that Creation or Intelligent Design be taught as an alternate theory or, in most environments, simply a belief. But, no, that has been unacceptable to you. Your goal is not only to stop the teaching of Creation, it is to stop the mere mention of it. There is a large lobby within the scientific community to make home schooling illegal because parents might teach their children about God. If the members of the so-called scientific community have their reasoned, logical way, they would criminalize religion. For the past few years it has made me ashamed to be a scientist!”

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Walter continued, “I’m sorry I worked myself into a frenzy, Randolph. It would be different, you know, if we actually had the answers. But we don’t. As I alluded to a moment ago, we have no clue how the mind works. You know that. Physicists to this day cannot explain something as commonplace as lightning, for God’s sake. That, by the way, hasn’t stopped us from putting forward a stream of theories supposedly explaining the process of lightning before we’ve bothered to actually prove or disprove them. There are parents out there, sitting on their patios during a storm, who pass on to their children the ‘fact’ that as clouds pass over the Earth, differential charges build up, like walking on a carpet, until lightning strikes to equalize the charges, the same as static electricity when you touch a doorknob. They teach it to their children as a fact because scientists taught it to them as one.”

“That isn’t how it works?” asked Duncan.

“See what I mean. No, that isn’t how it works. The charges that develop are a small fraction of what would be needed to cause the event. So what do the reasoned, truth-seeking scientists do when confronted with reality? The same thing we always do. Instead of just admitting we don’t know and keeping our mouths shut, we start adding embellishments to the original theory, just as scientists did when confronted with the physical observations that made it impossible for the sun and other planets to be orbiting around the Earth. They added epi-cycles, convoluted and increasingly complex orbits within orbits, to account for the observations, rather than just abandoning the theory. Physicists are now saying that cosmic rays, passing through the clouds, provide the additional energy or channel to allow the weak charge differential between the ground and the cloud to trigger a lightning strike.”

Walter paused and sighed, showing his frustration. “Randolph, we scientists cannot even explain why it is that when one person in a group yawns, everyone else starts yawning. I’ve actually read a paper on it. I’m as curious as anyone. Do you know what the scientific explanation was?”

“No. I guess I missed that paper.”

"That everyone in the group starts yawning because there must be a shortage of oxygen! Isn't that ridiculous? Several years ago, a television station set up a camera next to a freeway, positioned so it would catch the faces of the drivers. They placed it just past a billboard that had a white background with nothing except a huge letter 'O' in the center. Guess what? Most of the drivers yawned after seeing the 'O.' I guess each of those cars had a sudden shortage of oxygen.

"It's taking me a long time to get there, but my point is…when scientists add epi-cycles, add cosmic rays as lightning triggers, or insist that an oxygen shortage is the cause for mass yawning, all in the name of defending the indefensible, don't they sound a lot like those religious folks whom you so love to bash for their illogical and emotion-based reasoning?"

"We're not perfect, Walter. You know that."

"Yes, I do know that. Unfortunately, the masses have been led to believe that we are. And they have been led to that belief by us. They have been taught to revere the 'scientific method.' They have been brainwashed to believe whatever we say, no matter how absurd. They believed us twenty years ago when we were all telling them that we were heading into an ice age. They believe us now when we tell them that they're creating global warming. Randolph, we are guilty of only living in the 'now,' as the New Agers call it. We've lost the ability, if we ever had it, to look back at our own past and be humbled by it. *Scientific American* has a regular column each issue where they reprint articles from twenty-five, fifty, and a hundred years ago. *New Scientist* recently started the same practice. We all love to read the old stuff and chuckle to ourselves, marveling at what fools we had for scientists years ago. We laugh, that is, until we've practiced our trade long enough for our own papers or statements from twenty-five years ago to appear among those reprints. Then, all of a sudden, it's not quite so funny.

"That happened to me recently…on a paper supposedly explaining what happens at the event horizon of black holes. I was totally full of crap. It was something of an epiphany for me, and I started going back through the old, peer-reviewed science journals, highlighting in the indexes which of the papers within were also full of crap. Randolph, the ratio was staggering. We, as a group, are wrong much more often than right. To go back to my

earlier analogy, if a contractor failed as often as we do, his collapsing buildings would have killed thousands by now. Using whatever analogy you'd like, if any single person had our consolidated batting record, he or she would be considered a failure and an incompetent. And yet we, as a group, refuse to practice even the smallest degree of humility, loudly proclaiming with absolute certainty each new conclusion that we reach…as if it were, well, gospel.

"We are furious that every single leader on Earth has not embraced our warnings about global warming. We've told them all, in no uncertain terms, that drastic changes in their lifestyles must occur, entire industries must be outlawed, hundreds of thousands of people must be put out of work. Randolph, I don't know if global warming is happening or not. From what I've read, the average temperatures from hundreds of stations with good history are gradually going up. Since most of those stations are located in urban areas, and the urban heat island effect is a proven phenomenon, I would like to see the trend after that effect is factored out. But, I'm a physicist, not a climatologist, so what do I know?

"I hope the members of scientific community are wrong on this one because none of the people are going to listen to them. Why should they? If your neighbor came to your door and told you that you had to give up your possessions and move into a tent because, if you didn't, something horrible was going to happen, would you do it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because my neighbor is a flake."

"By that I assume you mean he doesn't have the credibility to warrant following such extreme advice?"

"That would be an understatement."

"The problem is, neither do we. We have blown our credibility so many times over that it is unbelievable."

"Walter, you don't really believe that global warming isn't happening, do you?"

"My gut tells me there is something going on and that something is not good. The planet has warmed and cooled cyclically for millions of years.

The ice has frozen and retreated countless times. I don't know if what's happening now is part of the cycle, man-made, or a combination of the two. I do know that a few years ago most of the globe outlawed aerosol propellants at the urging of the global warming advocates who argued that the propellants contributed to the warming process. Now, the atmospheric scientists and climatologists are discovering that those propellants were actually moderating the warming process, and that their removal has accelerated the warming effect. And that's the problem: we scientists are too quick to tell the whole world what to do even when we don't have our ducks in a row."

Doris, who had been quietly eating during Walter's diatribe, asked, "Randolph, doesn't it strike you as ironic that the very lifestyle changes proposed by the scientists to prevent global warming were suggested two thousand years ago by Christ? A less consumptive, less materialistic lifestyle has always been His message. The very person that you view as 'public enemy number one' is one of your best allies."

Duncan held up his hands defensively. "Look, Walter, Doris, I'm not going to sit here and defend this amorphous body called science. We've been less than perfect, and I include myself. But, for the most part, the motives have been good. The average scientist – whether he's a chemist, climatologist, physicist, or biologist – wants to help, wants to do something that betters the lot of mankind."

"I disagree," said Penfield. "What I've noticed of late is a tendency to be anti-anthropomorphic."

Duncan, puzzled, asked, "How so?"

"I think it verges on a hatred of all that is mankind. It almost feels as if that is the underlying agenda of many scientists, that man is a blight upon the Earth, that everything we do is inherently, by definition, unnatural and therefore destructive. We, as a discipline, have forgotten the basic concept of entropy as it relates to our abode. Earth is our home. And any home will suffer degradation as a result of supporting its residents. As responsible homeowners, we're supposed to maintain it, fix the damage, and replace the worn-out. More and more of what I read is not constructive. There are few 'how to' tips to repair the damage our living here creates. The recurring

message seems to be that the house is precious and that we are the culprits. The only solution is for us to move out of the house so that *it* can be okay, because if we stick around, our very nature dictates that we will destroy it ourselves.

"And this self-hatred spills over into so many other areas. The so-called solutions that science provides are not solutions to our problems; they are edicts on how we need to alter our habits, change our choices, and quit being so damn human. I don't need to be told that being overweight is bad for me. I don't need to be told that smoking is bad – or driving fast or eating trans fats or any of the countless other choices that science lectures me about. I already know all of those things, and I don't need someone else judging me for doing any of them. What I need, what we all really need is to know that someone out there is working on fixes for all of those things."

Duncan smiled and said, "My visit this morning really unleashed quite a lecture."

Walter laughed. "Randolph, I'm sorry. There's no reason for you to suffer the brunt of this rant. It's just that, well, we're leaving soon. And there is so much that I always wanted to say and didn't. You just happened to be the unlucky cuss who showed up."

"No problem," answered Duncan. "You've actually given me a lot to think about after you, uh, leave."

They all fell silent. Duncan and Penfield returned their attention to their now cold meals. Doris stared off into the distance. The first to speak was Duncan. In a soft voice, he asked, "What was he like?"

Penfield, again putting down his fork, frowned thoughtfully for a moment before answering. "Amazing, actually. I went into the interview thinking it was total BS. I believed in God, always have. I just didn't think for a moment that this person, sitting in an interrogation room at the FBI, was going to be Him. Have you read the transcripts?"

"I have. After a rather poignant discussion with one of the postdocs in my department, who also is…or was, I guess…a good friend, I pulled them up and read them all."

"What did you think?"

"He seemed persuasive."

Penfield laughed. “Yes. That’s an understatement.”

“The physics…the math. Does it all hold up?”

“As I said before, it’ll take a long time to run the numbers and set up the experiments, but, yes, it surely looks as though it makes sense. It definitely answers more questions and ties up more loose ends than the directions we’ve been going for the last three decades. What’s your take on the biology He mentioned?”

“Well, unlike your field, he really didn’t come out with a new paradigm. His point seemed to be that evolution does exist; it’s just the tool that he uses to achieve his goals.”

“Except, of course, for when it takes a wrong turn.”

“Right. Then he steps in and makes a correction.”

“Randolph,” Doris asked, “how is that different from what you already believed? I mean, whether you call it God or nature, isn’t it all basically the same?”

“You mean except for the drastic interventions? There really wouldn’t be a difference, other than semantics, I guess.”

“Then why the strongly held resistance to the idea of God?”

“Doris, a week ago I could have answered that. Today I’m not so sure. The truth is that a lot of what Elohim said differs from the dogma I’ve fought against my whole life. So many of the religious zealots maintained that God created each and every living thing on Earth, exactly as it exists today. I had a problem with that. We may not be able to put together the full story of evolution with no gaps, but we damn well can prove that the process is occurring and has occurred throughout history. But Elohim did not side with them. He acknowledged that evolution is happening right under our noses. So, I guess the answer is that I thought I was reacting to what God was supposed to be, when I was actually only responding to a fringe of believers who had taken things a bit too literally.”

“I, too, had a problem with some of the specifics from the literalists in religion,” Penfield said. “The Earth only being six thousand years old was something we could disprove authoritatively. And then Elohim comes along and explains that there has been a time dilation. It’s just that we’re all human – rabbis, priests, scientists, everyone. And we’re all prone to make

mistakes. He's gone a long way toward setting right some of the misconceptions of the religious and the rest of us, as well."

"My main problem, I guess," said Duncan, "is being told that I'm a guinea pig in some grand experiment or, worse yet, that I'm some cow on a breeding farm."

Doris leaned forward, placing her hand on Duncan's. "You would prefer to think that it all means nothing? We're born, we live, we die, and that's it? In Elohim's universe we have a purpose, a goal, and we have an eternal soul. We also inhabit an environment that was created especially for us. That's got to be better than your alternative that we are just a throbbing, rutting fluke of nature with no inherent reason to exist."

Walter added, "Scientists have always avoided taking an anthrocentric position. It goes back to the shame of the past. Scientists of the day… centuries ago…insisted that *we* were the center of the solar system – not the sun. As I mentioned before, when physical evidence piled up disproving this, they concocted more and more outlandish theories to attempt to support it. It was a dark time for science, and current day practitioners never want to repeat it. Duncan, you've obviously heard of the Big Bang, right?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that, observationally, we have proved that all of the stars in the universe are moving away from Earth in all directions?"

"No. I've never heard that."

"You haven't heard it because it isn't talked about."

"That would mean that the point of origin…the location of the Big Bang…is here?"

"It would, normally. Yet astronomers and astrophysicists cannot bring themselves to take that position. The theories created to explain it…to avoid or ignore the obvious facts…are as convoluted as the epi-cycles of old, all so they never have to come out and say that Earth *is* the center of the universe. We are ignoring evidence. In fact, we are deliberately burying it so we can avoid ever taking the position that there is anything special about Earth or mankind."

Randolph Duncan stared down at his plate for some time before speaking. Finally, he said, "When we first started talking, I told you the

reason for my visit was to discuss the existence of God. That wasn't true. I didn't consciously realize it at the time, but during our talk this morning I've figured out that my real reason for coming was to speak with someone who has met Elohim, someone whose intellect I could respect and whose opinions I could trust, and someone who would see Him again."

"Why is that?" Walter asked.

"To give you a message that I would like you to pass on to Him."

"I'm sure you noticed in the transcripts, Randolph, that no messenger is necessary with Elohim. He's listening right now."

Duncan just nodded. Doris and Walter could see his attempt to visualize Elohim. "Yes. You're right. I do remember that." He paused again, collecting his thoughts, at last saying, "I never thought I'd ever say a prayer, but I guess that's what this is, isn't it?"

Doris replied, "It's not a prayer, whatever that means. It's just talking. Go ahead, talk to Him, Randolph."

Still looking down, Duncan began, "These fine people with me this morning are right. I've never given You a fair break. I've never even allowed my mind to open enough to grant the possibility of Your being real. I've actually hated those who believed in You, even though I have no idea why I felt that way. I know I'll be one of those left behind when You leave in a few days. I just wanted You to know that my mind is open now. There's a lot I still don't understand, a lot I still need to learn. But I think I've finally opened up a door that I've kept shut for a long time. And I think it's time I walked through it. And, one more thing, I am sorry for the damage I've done, for the people my words have swayed who otherwise might have believed." Duncan hesitated, appearing to come to a decision, before continuing. "And I'm sorry that I've surely disappointed You."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kathy Crocker, smiling at the camera, said, “Good Morning. We are continuing with our coverage of yesterday’s attack in Times Square as well as our ongoing coverage of the arrival of Elohim. Joining me is, of course, Barry Thorndike. Good morning, Barry.”

“Thank you, Kathy. It is, indeed, a bleak day for the police officers and forensic staff of the New York City Medical Examiner’s Office, as they continue the process of gathering the bodies of the deceased in Times Square. Although the poisonous gas has dissipated, the entire area surrounding the location of the attack is cordoned off, leaving thousands of people without a place to go to work this morning. Several of the gas canisters used in the attack have now been recovered and are being studied for possible clues. The FBI released a statement this morning informing us that there are no solid leads at this point in their investigation of the massacre at Times Square. As you may recall, all of the terrorists involved in the actual execution of the plot were either killed or managed to escape, leaving authorities with no one to question. Those who were killed are still being identified, and the FBI is hopeful that they will find a connection between the shooters and the persons or organization behind the plot. According to the FBI, no group has claimed credit for the attack. Kathy?”

“Thank you, Barry. Following up on the events resulting from Elohim’s statement, we have now learned that Elohim, accompanied by Dr. Reese Johnson, traveled to the Vatican yesterday and met with the Pope. We do not have any details on this visit and hope to hear from a representative of the Catholic Church soon.

“Providing us with a different perspective on the mark that apparently Elohim has placed on many around the world, we have Doctor Timothy Shearing, a Bible scholar and an expert on the particular section of the Bible called Revelation.”

The camera shifted back to show a nervous, middle-aged, balding man.

“Doctor Shearing,” Crocker continued, “I understand you have a biblical perspective on the mark?”

Shearing cleared his throat loudly before speaking. “Uh, yes. It’s a passage from Revelation…13:16-17.” His hands trembling, Shearing picked up a paper and began to read, “*He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of the name.*”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand. This passage says that *all* will receive the mark. That’s certainly not the case.”

“That’s not the only discrepancy,” answered Shearing. “It also states that the mark will be the name or number of the beast.”

“The beast?”

“Why, yes, Satan. The ‘he’ referred to in this passage as to the one who will place the mark is the Antichrist.”

Crocker stared blankly at the scholar, obviously unsure of the direction to take with her next question. Barry Thorndike stepped in by asking, “Are you saying that Elohim is the Antichrist?”

Looking startled, Shearing blurted out, “No, no, not at all. Well, I mean I can’t say for certain that he is not. But the appearance of the mark does not necessarily prove that he is, either.”

Crocker, finding her voice, said, “Well, you’ve certainly given us something to think about. Thank you, Doctor Shearing. In business news, the stock market continues its free-fall, which actually began before Elohim spoke to the public, at the time his visit was first described by Archbishop Kerry Coughlin. We’ll have a full report from our financial consultant, Patricia Weldon, coming up in the second half-hour of the program.”

The director smoothly switched back to a close-up of Barry Thorndike who continued, “As everyone tries to recover from the trauma of the senseless attack in Times Square, the world continues to grapple with the ramifications of Elohim’s announcement. It seems that the biggest question on everyone’s mind is – ‘Who’s going?’ Several rapid polls have been conducted in an attempt to determine the number of people who have received the distinctive mark on their right hands and, thus far, the results have been mixed. To discuss the various results and possibly shed some

light on them is Mark Simak, the founder and president of Simak Opinion Research."

The camera view switched to a shot showing Thorndike and his guest, a middle-aged, slender man with gray hair and a drooping moustache. "Mark, thank you for joining us this morning."

"My pleasure, Barry."

"As I mentioned, several 'rapid' polls have been conducted in the time since Elohim's announcement, including a poll done on behalf of this network, performed by your organization. Before telling us the results, could you briefly describe for us the methodology and structure of your poll?"

"Of course. As you mentioned, there are several polling companies attempting to ascertain the percentage of the public, at least of the people who reside within the United States or Europe, who have received the invitation, the mark. The first results that I've seen – when people were called and simply asked 'Do you have the mark?' or 'Did you receive Elohim's mark?' or other similarly worded queries – had significantly differing responses; so varied were the answers that I suspected there might be issues of veracity involved."

"You think some people lied?"

"Bluntly, yes."

"Why did you suspect that, and in which direction were they lying?"

"To answer your second question first, it turns out that the prevaricators were on both sides. The answer to your first question was originally a gut feeling based upon personal observation. Very few of the people I encountered had the mark. In the time since the announcement by Elohim, I've only personally met perhaps five or six people with it. And yet the polls that were coming out were reporting that one out of four or even one out of three people had it. Logically, there were only two possible explanations. Either the circle within which I traveled was filled with people who were very unlikely to be chosen, or the polls were wrong." Smiling, he continued, "My ego prompted me to pursue the latter."

"Mark, were you able to determine a more accurate figure? And, if so, how?"

“Yes, I believe we were. Our first step was to create a control group. We did that by choosing three demographically representative neighborhoods: one neighborhood in the outskirts of New York, the second in Kansas City, and the third in Biloxi. We mobilized a team of canvassers and sent them into those neighborhoods to perform a marketing study. To maximize participation we gave away a rather pricey MP3 player and headphones to each participant. The marketing study was a sham. Its sole purpose was to determine if the person or persons we talked with had the mark.”

“What were the results of this first door-to-door effort?”

“Well, between those who actually participated in the survey and those whose right hands we were able to clearly see in the process of being turned down by the residents, our various field personnel were able to categorize a total of 812 people, which is a statistically sufficient sample size. Out of the 812 people, only 21 had the mark.”

“That’s less than 3%.”

“It’s 2.59%, obviously quite a bit lower than the 25 - 30% that other polls were reporting. Yesterday, we also sent out two teams to major public areas such as a mall and an airport. In those locations we also gave away the MP3 player in exchange for a brief interview, again solely for the purpose of determining the presence of the mark. When we visited the residences, we obviously had the names and addresses of the participants, as well as those whose right hands were visible, for later contact. In our survey at public places, we obtained names and contact information by offering additional free merchandise.”

“How did the 2.59% figure hold up at the mall and airport?”

“Close, actually. From a sampling group of 548, there were 12 who had the mark, or 2.19%.”

“Mark, that’s fascinating. Why do you think there is such a disparity?”

“Actually, Barry, before I answer that, the fascinating part is what happened next. Yesterday evening, after finishing all of the field work, we then called as many of the participants we had identified as we could reach by telephone. Of the 1,360 people identified, we were successful in reaching 951. In those phone conversations, we identified ourselves as being with the Simak Opinion Research company and performed a standard

telephone poll, similar to the polls performed by other organizations, inquiring as to whether they had the mark. Of the 951 polled, 28.08%, or 267 participants answered that they had the mark."

"Amazing. And that was from a group which you had already confirmed contained less than 3% who bore the mark."

"That's correct."

"So can you now poll other groups and assume that 25% are not truthful."

"Actually, Barry, it's much more fascinating than that. Of the 267 who said they had the mark, all but 2 of them were not truthful, which did not account for those with the mark."

"That is amazing, Mark. What you're saying is that essentially all of the people who said they had the mark didn't…."

"And essentially all of those who did have it denied it."

"Do you have any theories as to why people are responding this way?"

"I'm not a psychologist. I'll leave that speculation to the experts. I can tell you this. For this poll because we had established an excellent, verified control group, we also decided to experiment with some relatively new technology, at least new for the polling industry. During the telephone polling we utilized voice stress analysis equipment and software."

"The so-called voice lie detector."

"Yes. It has never proved itself very dependable for that purpose. But since we already knew the truth, we thought we would deploy it as a further test just to see what we would learn. The equipment and software had a moderately good success rate at identifying the untruths, somewhere in the 65% range, certainly not a high enough result to be able to rely upon in future polling. However, there was one interesting result. Of the group we had identified from physical observation as having the mark, as we spoke to those people and they claimed to not have it, their voice stress readings were nearly off the scale."

"Mark, that is fascinating. I am obviously not a psychologist either, yet it isn't hard to jump to the conclusion that since your final telephone poll was taken after the Times Square attack yesterday morning, there might be

fear in the minds of those with the mark, fear that they could be the next target."

"That certainly is a logical conclusion, Barry."

"In the meantime, I guess what we've really learned from all of this is that the most accurate assessment of the population who will be departing soon is less than 3%?"

"At least for the demographic profile used in the study. Different demographics, different locales around the country and around the world could certainly have substantially disparate results."

"That's true. And, I suppose the other fact we can take from this study is that approximately a third of the population wish they were going?"

"Or, at the very least, wish other people to think of them in that way. We must recall that the majority of those killed in Times Square did not have it, yet they wanted to be associated with the Chosen as Elohim refers to those with the mark."

"Mark, thank you very much for an outstanding job on this."

"My pleasure, Barry. My bill to the network is in the mail."

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Suri Kaval stood at the podium in the main chamber of the United Nations building in New York, staring out at the semicircular rows of interconnected desks that radiated out from him like ripples in a pond disturbed by a dropped stone. Nearly all of the chairs were filled, with the notable exception of the ambassador from the United States and a few others. Word had gone out to the delegates yesterday that the Secretary General was to address the body this morning, and the vast majority had managed to rearrange their schedules to attend. Kaval noticed with satisfaction that the various media organizations had assembled their teams to cover his speech, as well.

The small, green light built into the top of the podium lit, indicating that all connections between the staff translators and the delegates were complete, tested, and ready. Kaval began, "Greetings to all delegates, and thank you for your attendance on such short notice. The events of the last

few days require the attention of this body. In the time of less than a week, the world has experienced a cascade of emotions, from hope and joy to fear, terror, and despair.

"In approximately half a century since this noble organization has existed, we have seen and have been instrumental in great progress on this planet: progress in the areas of nutrition and health care through the World Health Organization; progress in the technological advancement of the underdeveloped countries of the world through the World Bank; progress in the reversal of damaging activities that have threatened the survival of our very lives in the areas of whaling, over-fishing, pollution, nuclear-waste disposal, and many others. We have accomplished this progress through the resolutions and actions of this main body. We continue to battle the forces that wish to plunge our planet into a warming cycle that will have devastating effects on all of us. And we have enjoyed the elimination of global war since the end of World War II. Of course there have been conflicts. Yet the majority of those have been resolved peacefully with the aid and intervention of our peacekeeping forces. With our help and support we have seen the unification of Europe and a new cooperation with countries that have long sequestered themselves from the family of nations.

"This last half-century has seen a blurring of borders and a growing recognition that we are all citizens of Earth, that we are all brothers and sisters, and that the breath that you exhale will be my next breath. The glass of water that I save instead of waste will be your next drink. The food that you grow today will feed us all tomorrow. We have been steadily moving toward a day when the phrase 'United Nations' does not simply describe an organization with good intentions but describes the governance of Earth. We continue to nurture the belief that borders are obsolete. How can they not be? The radioactive fallout from Chernoble has damaged the bodies and the newborns of those living outside the former Soviet Union. The day-to-day work that must be performed within the United States goes undone without the intervention of ready and able-bodied workers from Mexico. The constant attempts by tribes to enforce the borders in Africa result in the deaths of millions.

“There is greater wisdom than anyone realized in the phrase ‘divide and conquer.’ Under the guises of self-governance, independence, and freedom, the peoples of the world have been splintered into hundreds of largely ineffectual sub-countries. These countries cannot thrive because they have been deliberately, to use an American political term, ‘gerrymandered’ to limit their resources and fragment their populations, thus causing a dependence upon a few or, in many cases, only one true country. Therefore, they are doomed to remain less than bona fide nations.

“The countries of Europe have recognized this subtle oppression. They knew that as long as they remained individual nation-states with their own inherent strengths and weaknesses, they would remain inferior to and therefore reliant upon the whims of the United States. The process now occurring in Europe is a process of hope and joy, as Germany and France and England and the others band together to forge the creation of a single union – a union that, once completed, will contain within itself the resources needed to choose its own path, to follow its own destiny sans the influence from without.

“The United States has long preached to the world that democracy is the key, that it is the answer to all of our problems. The hard lesson we have learned is that it is not. It is merely a tool for the purpose of further splintering and segmenting mankind by offering vague and nebulous rewards such as freedom and liberty. Is Iraq free? Do the Afghanis enjoy liberty? How free are Taiwan and South Korea when their very existence depends upon the protective umbrella of the United States? Does anyone seriously believe that the umbrella would not be withdrawn the first time they displease their master by truly exercising their so-called freedom? Is the United States, the paragon of liberty and freedom, truly free? U.S. prisons hold a much larger number of their citizens than those of any other country on Earth, including countries labeled as the most oppressive.

“Their democracy panders to the basest of human instincts, encouraging isolationism, selfishness, and greed, which lead to a nationalistic imperative to exploit the environment and squander the precious resources of our planet without regard for those who may live outside their borders. Democracy, because of its inherent egocentric nature, encourages, in fact,

demands the existence of hundreds of small, impotent states which then ensures that no single country can rise up and challenge the dominance of the United States.

“And so, the world stage is now set. On one side we have the obsolete notions of the sole superpower, struggling to maintain the many illusions it has created since the middle of the last century. We were all deceived for many years. We were deceived because we were accustomed to the historic natural tendency of super-states to inevitably seek to rule the world. The leaders of the United States claimed to have no interest in such endeavors, and they were truthful in a sense. They were perfectly content to remain within their own borders. With the military might they attained in the years following World War II, there was no doubt that the United States could have easily taken over Canada, Mexico, all of Central and South America, and the Caribbean. The rest of the world saw that they did not do this and took this fact as proof that the United States was a benign force.

“Only as a result of watching their actions, rather than listening to their words, did we finally come to our senses and understand that their true intent was to remain as they have been and as they are. For the true cost of taking Mexico would be that the people of the United States would then be forced to allow the Mexicans to become an equal part of their country. They would then be required to share their incredible bounty of resources with this new group. We now know the truth. The United States has no interest in conquering countries because its citizens have no interest in sharing what they have. And why should they? Why should they conquer and share when they can simply take the resources of others, leaving each of those other countries to attempt to survive after having been pillaged by them? What other country in the history of mankind has ever built a wall at its border to keep out not invaders, but souls desirous of citizenship?

“It is a strange statement to make; yet, the conquerors of the past, men we have all vilified, at the very least assumed the responsibility for the people they conquered. The United States feels no such obligation. Rather than seizing a household and, once owning it, feeding the children within, the United States simply steals what it needs to satisfy the seemingly insatiable appetites of its citizens, leaving the children of the robbed

household to starve. And as those children starve, they are told to be happy and joyous because they are now free. They *are* free! They are free to live a deprived life and then to die!

"Contrary to the oft-repeated platitudes of the President of the United States, the fruits of this effort are not ripening; they are rotting, and more and more of the world can smell the stench. This is why the countries of Europe are banding together. And the urge to join this new affiliation is spreading beyond the area of Western Europe to include Russia and many of its former satellites. This movement is anathema to the United States. It signals the eventual end of its ability to rob, steal, and plunder from the rest of the countries on Earth. For if all of the countries join this new union, they will no longer be the small, needy, and defenseless states that have been easy pickings for the United States. They will be a part of a group that can stand up to the hungry beast. And as the United States loses its supply sources, it will wither and weaken until it, too, will either collapse or join this new family of man.

"That is why the United States is so threatened by recent events. It foresees its eventual demise. So, is it a coincidence that at this moment in time, as the tide is turning away from the sole superpower, we see the arrival of this man, Elohim – a man who purports to be a god, who pretends to be the being who is our creator.

"Does this supreme being arrive with the promise of ending our conflicts and repairing our broken planet? No! He tells us that we are on trial! On trial! And he calls the acts of reaching out to us and ending our suffering – 'tampering'! The heaven that he describes is a place where only a select few may live in luxury and happiness while the rest of us toil here on Earth. It is no wonder that this god of the Jews did not materialize in Israel. Nor is it any wonder that this god of the Catholics did not appear in Rome. The heaven he describes sounds like the United States…a place where a select few can live in luxury and opulence while the rest of the world struggles to maintain the master's lifestyle.

"He refers to us as his children and tells us that he loves all of us, yet he does not treat us as if he does. Since he has arrived, has he lifted a finger to end the pain and suffering of AIDS in Africa where innocent children are

dying each day? Has he waved his arm and ended the global warming crisis that is enveloping our planet, our home, threatening to cause the greatest mass extinctions the world has seen in millions of years? Has he removed the scales from the eyes of the Israelis and the Arabs and brought peace to the Middle East, ending a several-thousand-year struggle that is fought in his name? Has he gathered up the nuclear arsenals of the former Soviet Union, China, England, France, the United States, and the other members of the so-called Atomic Club and hurled them into the sun, removing the ominous threat that hangs over the heads of the people of the world?"

Kaval paused for a moment, surveying the eyes and body language of the delegates before him and liking what he saw, and then added, "And when his own faithful gathered in his name, did he lift a finger to make them safe? Or did he simply stand back and watch them be slaughtered?

"He has not rectified any of these things! Nor has he addressed the myriad of other famines, blights, diseases, conflicts, or damages to our environment that so devastate every living person, that prematurely end our lives and prevent us all from reaching our true potential. No…that would be *tampering*!" Kaval delivered the final word with all of the contempt he could muster.

"I ask you…each and every one of you…every person on Earth…to ask yourself two questions: Is this the being I have devoted my life to serving? Can this heartless and cruel man be my god? I particularly direct these questions to the select few among you who feel special, who feel superior to the rest of us because of the marks that have magically appeared upon your right palms. I ask each of you, in your smugness, to reflect for a moment upon whether you, if you suddenly possessed the power of god, could look upon the pain, hunger, and suffering of the world and turn your back on it? If you are honest…if you have looked deeply into your own soul and not found the coldness and the hardness that are necessary to do this, you must ask yourself, 'How can my god?'

"Mankind now stands on the precipice. We are on the verge of finally casting off the artificial borders and barriers that have distracted us and prevented us from living as a single family on this planet, our home. It has been mankind who has tried to end the suffering of AIDS, who struggles to

reverse the ominous threat of global warming, who has sought to end the strife in the Middle East, who has already dismantled thousands of nuclear weapons and promises to eradicate many more. We have also dedicated ourselves, not to the service of god, but to the service of mankind by working to end the famines, blights, diseases, conflicts, or assaults upon our environment that weaken mankind's soul and break mankind's spirit.

"Our message to you…each of you with the mark as well as the billions without it…is that it is time to decide. It is time to choose either a god…a god who tells you that you are nothing but a parasite, and that this world – our home – is nothing but your unfortunate host, to be exploited and consumed at your whim and abandoned by you once it is used up…or your own family – those who truly do care about you, who do not simply set you adrift and tell you that you are on your own, that you are on *trial*. They are the ones who appear to you when you are stricken with misfortune or disaster, offering not silver wings and an eternal life of bliss but simply a helping hand, a drink of water, a loaf of bread, a shelter.

"You can choose a god who demands of you a lifetime of sacrifice and commitment to him. Or you can choose your own brothers and sisters who only ask that you be a responsible citizen and a tolerant human being.

"As you make this choice, I ask you to remember this: If you are ever so unfortunate to find yourself in a place ravaged by a hurricane, an earthquake, or a war, and you and your loved ones are trapped within a fallen building, you will, in this moment of dire need and hopelessness, pray to your god for help. But the help, when it arrives, will not be from god. The sweat and the pain and the risk to their own lives, the Herculean effort to dig you out, to rescue you and your loved ones, to tend to your injuries, and to give you water and food will come from strangers. It will come from your fellow man.

"There have been many times in our history, as we looked upon horrendous events, that we have all wondered how god could do such things. We have met him, and now we know."

Suri Kaval stopped and gazed at the silent delegation for a long moment before saying, "Thank you."

The massive chamber immediately filled with thunderous applause as the delegates came to their feet. Kaval showed no intent of leaving the podium as he basked in the ovation which continued for several minutes. The television news commentators who covered the speech respectfully remained silent as the applause continued.

א

Margo Jackson, watching the speech from her office at the Hoover Building, punched the eject button on her DVD recorder and grabbed the disc before it was finished sliding out. She dashed out of her office and arrived at Ricki Darling's office within minutes. Exercising the prerogative of rank, Margo brushed past the secretary and opened the door.

Looking up from her work, Darling said, "Jackson, what's up?"

Margo dropped the DVD on her desk. "Check the voice on this against the voice from the cell phone call."

א

Bill Burke, Margo Jackson, and Ricki Darling waited quietly in Burke's office. None of them wanted to speculate on the ramifications of the Secretary General of the United Nations, who enjoyed full diplomatic immunity, being involved in the Times Square Massacre – as it was dubbed by the media – at least until they received confirmation from the techs at the sound lab. Their silent reverie was interrupted by the chirping of the phone on the meeting table. Burke reached out and punched the speaker button. "This is Bill Burke."

"Director Burke, this is Rick Rodriguez in the lab. It's a match."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir. We ran voice-print analysis and also had a language expert review syntax, word structure, and the like; it's a dead match."

"Thank you, Rick."

Burke terminated the connection, looking at Margo and sighing. "We have, I believe, a truly hot potato."

"That bastard!"

“Good call, Margo, recognizing the voice.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“What do you both want me to do on this?” asked Darling.

“Sit tight for now,” answered Burke. “I need to get with Clayton and the President.”

“You got it.”

Ricki got up to leave, and Margo said, “Ricki, at least let’s pull up known associates and start digging into phone records, financial information, the usual. Maybe we can find the identity of the other guy on the phone.”

“But do it quietly,” Bill added. “We don’t need the Secretary General of the UN calling a press conference and accusing us of investigating him after that speech.”

“No problem. We’ll keep it quiet.” She quickly left the office.

א

“I just can’t believe Kaval would be behind this,” said Preston Bennett incredulously.

“Believe it,” Clayton Dean replied. “We don’t have the smoking gun, but pretty damn close.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’ve turned the CIA loose on this, chasing down leads discreetly, I hope, in Kaval’s home country. I just need you to keep your eyes and ears open internationally. We need to paint a clear picture for the NSA on who is connected to whom out there. Suri Kaval isn’t out on a limb by himself. There must to be other countries, other leaders involved.”

“Clay, the UN hasn’t been a friend of ours for a long time, but this takes it to a new level. Between the attack in New York and Kaval’s speech talking about our obsolescence, it doesn’t make for a pretty scenario. I mean, he basically laid out his plan on worldwide television; all of the governments of the globe need to band together and oppose us. I’m just not sure how the attack figures into this?”

“Create unrest at home and distract us. Push us into what they see as more precipitous acts around the globe, alienating more countries and pushing more countries into their camp. That’s the President’s take on it. He might be right.”

“Makes sense. What’s our official response to his speech going to be? We can’t just let his comments stand unchallenged.”

Clayton sighed before answering, “Are we talking about pulling out?”

“Of the UN? Oh, crap! Doesn’t that just play into their hands?”

“That was my opinion. The President believes that, with Kaval’s speech and the absence of meaningful dissent or censure coming from other major players within the UN, staying would be tantamount to a wife staying with an abusive husband. I guess I can see his point. I mean, not only did Kaval trash us, but he received a twelve-minute standing ovation from the General Assembly.”

“Clay, when did we become the enemy?”

There was a momentary pause on the phone connection before Dean answered, “You’re in the political arena, Preston. You know the answer. The names change and the tactics evolve, but from the time of Attila the Hun or Alexander the Great, it has always been about power and control. The United States has cornered the market on those things in the last two decades since the Soviets fell. There are still people out there who want some of that power. The problem is that they have to take it from us.

“Nobody can come straight at us anymore; no one has the might. So they have to find our weaknesses and exploit them. They have to play our own game and beat us. Do you think that Muslims could have attacked France and the UK militarily and beaten them?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, they discovered they don’t have to spend the money and lose the troops for a venture doomed to failure, when they can simply take advantage of the existing laws and the weak will of the people and government. They don’t invade; they immigrate by the hundreds of thousands. And they take advantage of the fact that these countries are democracies. Once they arrive, they vote. When enough arrive, they can vote in their own leaders. Once the voters and their leaders are in place,

hell, they can even modify the constitutions of their new home countries, turn them into Muslim theocracies, do away with elections, whatever they want."

"You're right, Clay. In those two countries they are damn near a majority."

"Why go through the hassle of fighting a war you probably won't win once you've figured out that in a democracy, all you have to do is get enough people inside who will vote the way you want?"

"That's not happening here, though."

"No. It's not. The Muslims aren't geographically positioned to start coming through in droves under the guise of filling all of the jobs we need done."

"But Mexico is?"

Again, Dean was quiet for a time, finally answering, "You know, Preston, there isn't anything in our constitution that prevents the creation of the PRI party here. Once a majority is reached, either by immigration or by a combination of that and reproduction, everyone else is forced to just sit back and watch helplessly as all of the laws, rules, and amendments are changed, making us a different country than we are today."

"A country that may not be able to hold on to the power?"

"Right."

"What's the President's take on this?"

"He doesn't buy it. I don't know why. He just doesn't perceive it as a threat."

"Clay, the one thing I don't understand is – why now? Why did Kaval let the cat out of the bag at this time, with God's arrival? The two don't seem to tie together."

"I don't know either, Preston. Maybe it's just the turmoil. Maybe it's because he believes that some of the pivotal people who would oppose his plan are leaving in a couple of days."

"Leaving a power vacuum?"

"Which he will be more than happy to fill. But really, I just don't know. I have a feeling there's something else, something we haven't figured out."

“Well, I’d better get to work. Maybe if I talk to enough of my contacts on the back channels, something will come up that’ll help.”

“I hope so. Just take your time and read them carefully. We need to figure out who is on which side of the fence on this.” A tone of deep sadness colored Dean’s voice. “Because right now, it feels as though we are up against the whole world.”

Preston hung up the secure phone. A listening and recording device, which was voice-activated and installed in the handset, and which bypassed the security sensors and scrambler, also switched off and began to burn a CD with a recording of the conversation. In addition to the secure phone installed by the NSA, Preston Bennett’s house was also equipped with an array of sensors, firewalls, and shielding, preventing the hard-wire transmission of unauthorized data as well as any RF transmissions leaving the home. To circumvent this, a CD containing the recording of the conversation was waiting to be retrieved from a hidden tray, located within a concealed compartment in Debbie Bennett’s closet. The surveillance equipment then accessed the regular phone line of the Bennett household and sent a text message to Debbie Bennett’s cell phone, which read, “hi hon I luv u,” a sufficiently innocuous message prearranged to alert her of the new recording.

א

The President squinted slightly under the glare of the television lights as they were switched on. He was happy with his decision to make a formal announcement from the Oval Office, rather than sharing his decision with the nation through a press conference. In the last few months the press corps had dropped any pretense of respect for him or his office and took delight in savaging him whenever they could. There was not any point in providing them with a forum, especially considering the nature of his announcement.

The media manager counted down to “zero” and cued him. “Good evening, fellow Americans,” the President began. “We have witnessed horrendous and disturbing events recently, culminating in the vicious and unprovoked murdering of approximately 18,000 innocent people in Times

Square. The FBI, CIA, New York City Police Department, Homeland Security, and various other law enforcement agencies are pursuing every possible lead to find the persons responsible for these acts and bring them to justice. Overseas, our friends and allies in Germany, England, France, and other nations have suffered from attacks that were equally as heinous, although directed at lesser numbers, and are also working diligently toward the same ends. They are cooperating with our agencies, as we are with theirs, and I am confident we will soon find the monsters behind these evil deeds. My heart and my prayers as well as the prayers of our nation go out to the families and friends of those killed around the world.

"At a time such as this, when all civilized nations should be banding together to provide comfort, support, and solace, there are those who have chosen to vilify and condemn. Today, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Suri Kaval, accused the United States of seeking to oppress and exploit the peoples of the world for our own selfish gain. It means nothing to Suri Kaval that no country in the history of the world has done more to feed, clothe, or provide shelter and medical care for those outside its borders than America. It means nothing to Suri Kaval that no nation in our history has shed more of its own blood to defend the weaker countries of the world than America. The much-vaunted European Union, which Kaval holds up as the great hope for the world's future, arguably would not exist today were it not for America's intervention against Germany half a century ago. It means nothing to him that we have given more money and more resources to the poorer countries of the world than any other nation in our history. And all we have asked in return is for the people of those countries to be allowed to live free.

"Yet it is that very freedom Secretary Kaval disdains, saying freedom is nothing but divisive and perpetuates an inferior class which is nothing more than a serfdom paying fealty to the United States. He maintains that we have created an environment where we have ours and the rest of the world can starve, ignoring the fact that the doors to our country have always been open…some will say they have been open too wide…to millions of people from around the world. We have taken them in, fed them, educated them, given them jobs, and welcomed them to enjoy all of the benefits of being

Americans. And we have done all of these things with no small cost to ourselves. These are hardly the actions of a country that wishes to selfishly amass and hoard the resources of the world.

"Suri Kaval credits the United Nations with the fact that there has been no global war in sixty years. While it is true that there has not been a war of global proportions, I ask you whether it is a result of the confused, misguided, and inept actions of the United Nations, or whether it has been due to the vigilance, restraint, and unbending willingness of the United States of America to help and intervene during difficult times. He takes credit for the technological advancement of many countries that are emerging from third-world status. I ask you whether it was the course of the hollow resolutions of the United Nations which accomplished this, or whether it was the training, equipment, and billions of dollars of investment from the United States of America. He seeks to take credit for feeding the poor, for curing diseases, and for addressing the other life-threatening or life-sustaining issues around the globe. Again I ask whether it was the United Nations which made strides in ameliorating these problems, or whether it was the charity, will, and resources of this great country which made the difference.

"America has never extended a helping hand with the expectation of gratitude, recognition, or reciprocity, and it is not the absence of gratitude that prompts me to make this announcement today. Instead, and with great sadness, I come before you with the realization that this organization, the United Nations, substantially created by the efforts of America, hosted and protected by America since its inception, and funded by America to a degree far greater than all of its other members combined, has grown to despise us and to see America as the enemy.

"It is understandable if a single member, even the Secretary General, holds America in contempt. That is the nature of politics in the world. It is also understandable if several of the delegates share that view. Again, that is the nature of our world. But when such a speech is given and is received by an extended standing ovation, and in the aftermath none of the members rise in our defense – save the representative from Great Britain, who was shouted down during his comments – it is finally time to admit the truth. It

is obvious that there is no place within the United Nations for America. And therefore, there is no place within America for the United Nations.

"Effective immediately, the lease in New York City for the United Nations headquarters is revoked as is the diplomatic status of all of the delegates. The United States has withdrawn all participation and support for this failed organization and asks that they immediately find a haven somewhere else in their new world. Thank you, and God bless America."

א

Elohim, sitting with Reese Johnson in the guest quarters at the State Department, closed his eyes and slowly let out a long exhale. Turning off the television, Reese faced him and asked, "Are You troubled?"

With pain and sadness coloring his expression, Elohim answered, "I'm afraid that it has begun."

Concerned, Reese said, "It seems to be moving rather quickly."

"Far too quickly, my child. More quickly than I had guessed."

"Elohim, I know we've talked about this, but I'm still confused. I don't understand why the other side is moving so fast. Why the attacks? Why the inflammatory speech from Kaval? Why now instead of waiting until after You've gone?"

"They are afraid, Reese. They are afraid that I have already converted too many just by my presence. They are concerned that the reality of our departure will convert even more."

Reese twisted around in his chair, fully facing Elohim. "Just to play devil's advocate for a moment, sorry about the choice of words…."

"Actually, they are quite appropriate. Please, continue."

"What is actually so different between what Kaval said about his goals for the world, and what You've been saying? I mean, he's talking about a one-world government, an equitable sharing of resources, only asking that each person be a good and tolerant citizen in return. The way he describes it, it sounds a lot like the way You've described Heaven."

"The answer to your question is simple. You rely upon his words, whereas I know what is in his heart. You must begin to trust your

instincts…your ‘gut’ feeling.”

“I should take it on faith?”

“Haven’t you always? There have been many times in your life when you have listened to both sides. Both arguments were possible, even plausible. Both were fair and reasonable. There was nothing in the words of either side that, standing alone, was sufficient to sway you. Yet you chose a side…many times.”

“That’s true.”

“Reliance upon your instinct, your ability to perceive and infer beyond mere words, has become crucial in your society. Centuries ago people were simply conquered. Ruling them was enforced by the sword and the guillotine. It was not essential to conquer their minds and their hearts. The prize was their land, their crops, their animals, and their minerals. If they did not cooperate, they were killed, and others were brought in to do the work.

“Today the true prize for any ruler is what can be produced with the mind. Real power and real dominance can only come with the products produced not in the field or from the mine but in the laboratory. Today’s rulers have learned that you can conquer a land yet not control the minds of those who produce such things. You may be able to force them to work. You may even hold their loved ones hostage with the threat of their torture and death. But you cannot compel creativity. To keep their loved ones alive, they will lie. They will tell you that the breakthrough you seek is only around the corner.”

“That’s true. Apparently that’s what happened in Iraq under Saddam. The scientists were telling him they had produced the weapons he wanted, when, in fact, they had not.”

“Yes. This is a relatively new phenomenon in your political world. Hitler understood it, as did Lenin and Marx. Earlier leaders only needed to control by force. These more modern leaders realized that they must give the people not only a noble goal, a reason to fight, but also a reason to create, to invent. They promised that, in exchange for their creativity and their inventiveness, the citizens would receive a better world. The promises

of a better world were mere words. Yet these leaders discovered that the pen was, indeed, mightier than the sword."

"And that is what Kaval is doing now?"

"It is. He and the others who have joined with him are very ambitious. Their goal does not differ from that of the despots to whom he referred in his speech. He seeks power. And the magnitude of the power he seeks can only be obtained if your country does not exist or, at the very least, does not exist in any sort of effective status. To obtain the power he and others crave, he must create a vision, a goal, a utopia where all would yearn to live. Then the people will not only follow him, they will be inspired to create, invent, and produce all that he will need in order to prevail. And do not underestimate him. He is quite effective. His words even resonated with you to a degree. Imagine the profound influence they had upon the majority of people around the world."

"Most people need to have something or someone to blame for their misfortune," Reese offered. "He is providing them with an evil America on a silver platter." Pausing, Reese looked thoughtful before saying, "I presume that we are not evil. You mentioned the same old bad guys utilizing the techniques of persuasion. I didn't notice a mention of Roosevelt or Reagan."

Elohim smiled, his first smile since the President's speech. "Your country is far from perfect, Reese. Over its history there have been many mistakes, as well as many times that its motives were less than pure. However, since obtaining its unique position as the first sole superpower, what is important is not to listen to the words but rather to notice the actions. Disregarding the obvious, which is that America has the wherewithal to eradicate every living person outside its borders from the face of the Earth – leaving the so-called resources free for the taking – it has, for the most part, done the opposite. Even if your country did not have the stomach to overtly destroy the other peoples of the world, it has intervened on their behalf many times when the expedient course, if Mr. Kaval's statements are true, would have been to let events proceed unchecked. Both nature and human nature have provided America with ample opportunities to allow entire countries to fail and to die with no

prompting from America, yet your government has stepped in repeatedly to restore peace, rebuilding infrastructures and providing security until they were once again viable. Those are hardly the actions of the country that Suri Kaval describes."

"It's ironic that so many of the nations we've helped in the past hate us now."

"It is not ironic, but natural. Whether it is an entire country or a single child, none want to be reminded of their own frailties. The leaders of those countries have the task, in the aftermath, of rebuilding not only their physical resources, but also their nation's pride, spirit, and ego. Acknowledging the need for your help is only an acknowledgment of their own weakness. To take the position that the United States came in for reasons other than altruistic is implying that the help was never needed… that they could have managed on their own. It is a much easier view of reality to embrace."

א

Dick Beaman stood off-camera, listening to the 250-person choir build to a dramatic crescendo as his announcer's deep voice thundered from the massive speakers and sub-woofers through the hall. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, your very favorite child of God, the man who is always there in your time of need, DICK BEAMAAAAAAN!"

Applause, shouting, and screaming burst from the audience, who had been worked into a frenzy prior to show time. Beaman allowed the orchestra to continue its intense version of Hank Williams' "I Saw the Light" for a full minute before cuing the choir to join in the song. The audience immediately began to accompany the choir, all standing, clapping, and stomping their feet as they sung at the top of their lungs. When the total cacophonous effect was nearly deafening and the energy level within the cavernous hall felt to him like an earthquake, Beaman ran out from behind the curtain, holding his arms straight out from his sides, his hands clenched in fists. The moment he came into view, the audience intensified their clapping and screaming, augmented by a twenty-five percent increase in volume from the PA systems. More than fifty spotlights whirled wildly over

Beaman, the stage, and the audience. A single, intense beam expertly stayed upon him as he ran to the front row of the audience, allowing them to grab him and hug him. The entire spectacle was captured on three stadium-sized screens mounted high on the walls, so the entire audience of nearly 20,000 could see a close-up of Beaman's face.

With the help of four security guards, Beaman extricated himself from the adoring crush of his followers and ran to the center of a raised platform on the stage. Behind him a four-story-tall crucifix seemed to float in midair, supported directly from behind by steel rods projecting out from the wall ten feet behind. The crucifix, made of crystal, was backlit and emanated a shimmering, sparkling, multifaceted brilliance that cast colored, fragmented pinpoints of light in all directions. Beaman stood directly in front of the magnificent icon, his arms again outstretched and fists clenched, mimicking its image, as the choir and the music slowly came down in volume. The audience reluctantly followed suit until, a full three minutes after his entrance, the room finally fell silent.

Beaman continued to stand motionlessly in the silence, his chin dropped almost to his chest, his eyes closed. He continued to extend his arms for another thirty seconds before slowly lowering them to his sides as his followers waited in enthralled anticipation. The raised platform had no fixtures or furniture. He did not use a podium or pulpit. The mouthpiece of his microphone was clear, tubular plastic and nearly invisible. As he first spoke with a gentle voice, the $4.5million sound system faithfully carried the tone and timbre to every ear in his cathedral.

"Today is a day of tremendous sorrow and yet also tremendous joy. We all saw the abominable attack upon the children of God yesterday morning in New York City. We all saw it. And we all felt the emptiness created by the departure of these souls. We still do because we are all God's children, and we are all connected…woven into the fabric of His robe. And when you rip out a small piece, each and every one of us, all of us feel the tear. That is why when each of you in my flock cries, I shed a tear. When each of you feels pain, that pain burns within me, also. This is true because we are all connected together."

Three remote-controlled cameras on hydraulic booms quietly shifted and swooped above the heads of the audience. Yet, they were oblivious to the distraction as Beaman continued, “Today is a day of tremendous joy because our Father, our Lord, our Creator walks among us on this Earth. And we all have felt His presence, His love, His grace. But He will not be here for long. As it has been prophesied, He has come among us on this Earth to judge us, to select a few to take home to Heaven.

“Out of the billions of people on Earth, He has chosen only a handful. He has chosen those who have risen above their daily trials and tribulations, their urges to succumb to the evil temptations of life, and have spent each day, each hour, each moment in the light of His everlasting love. Those who are the Chosen are the elite…they are the cream of the crop, and their absence will be felt by all when they depart. If we are all a part of the same robe, then the vast majority of the people on Earth, those who will not be departing, are the fabric. And, although the cloth is a rich and beautiful weave, full of colors and textures…and although the cloth makes the robe what it is and keeps us warm and sheltered from the storm…the Chosen are the stitches that hold it together. When they are removed, the robe will simply come apart, falling to a heap on the floor.”

Beaman’s voice built in intensity. “We need the Chosen. We need them to remain here to guide us, to light the way, to hold our very fabric together. Yet, they have earned their reward. Not only did God make a covenant with all of us, the Chosen made a covenant with God. That is obvious! You can tell by the way they lived their lives. And now, for them, the covenant is fulfilled, and they must take their rightful place in Heaven, living eternally next to God. And we have no right to ask them to remain.

“Since Elohim…” – Beaman paused and smiled serenely – “don’t you just love the wonderful sound of that name?” There was an immediate murmur of agreement from the audience. Beaman resumed when it ebbed. “Since Elohim arrived here on our Earth, He has seen it necessary to visit with a distinguished leader of the Jewish faith. He has also traveled around the world to spend some time with the leader of the Catholics.” He paused, gazing out over the eager faces of his audience. Flashing his broad smile, he asked, “Did’ja notice that He hasn’t come here? He hasn’t taken me aside

and had a little chat! Do ya wonder why? I don't know, but I guess that He thinks we're on the right path!"

The congregation erupted with laughter. As the cathedral quieted, Beaman began once more. "Three days from today, when Elohim and His Chosen have returned to the glorious realm of Heaven, there will be much work to do. It will be up you – each and every one of you – to pick up the fragments of the robe, to seize the needle and, making yourself the new thread, stitch it back together. And when you do this, you will have a choice. The new robe can be either weak and shabby, or more beautiful and stronger than it has ever been.

"And Elohim tells us that you will have to do this work while under siege. The demons, the minions of the devil, showed us yesterday that they, too, have been awaiting this day. They have waited with great anticipation for the arrival of our Lord, not to reap the benefits of His wisdom, not to bask in His love, not to share in the wonder of His grace; they have waited for this day so they could wipe you from the face of the Earth. For once you are gone, there will be no restraints placed upon them. They will be free to pursue a life of hedonism and sin without the interference of the godly. Without you, without your righteous presence to dampen their ardor, woman will sleep with woman, man with man, both with children, *and the bodies of the aborted, murdered babies shall form a mountain so high it will bury them all!"* The congregation again erupted, this time with cries of anger and fear, waving their arms and pumping their fists in the air. The raw emotion electrified the room. It was contagious and self-amplifying, causing each person there to be gripped with a frenzy. Dick Beaman did not exhort them to continue. He simply stood before them silently with arms again outstretched, fists clenched, and head drooped. It took minutes for the sudden adrenaline rush within the crowd to subside. When the last of the shouts ceased and silence again filled the room, Beaman opened his eyes and dropped his arms back to his side.

"You are about to enter the greatest battle that mankind has ever fought! You will face the devil himself as well as every demon under his spell! You will confront the multitude of sinners who, in their minds, have waited far too long to rise up against you and smite you! They now believe their time

has come, and they are preparing! The unholy massacre in New York City yesterday is but an hors d'oeuvre for their insatiable appetite!" Pausing for a long moment, he added, "Because YOU are the main course!"

Once again, already primed by the last outburst, the entire audience released their fury. If Beaman's words were not enough, on cue at the beginning of this outpouring from the congregation, the sound technician fed a powerful tone through the sub-woofers built within and scattered throughout the floor of the chamber. Below a human's ability to hear it, this additional low-frequency vibration aided the hysteria by causing the audience members' pulses to race, their blood pressures to rise, and their bodies to be flooded with even more adrenaline. The pews barely contained them in their thrashing frenzy, and the overall sound was overwhelming and did not diminish for several minutes, as Beaman reassumed his pose in front of them.

When silence eventually returned, Beaman continued, "Since our beloved Lord spoke to us all just three days ago and placed his mark upon the Chosen, I have struggled with my own agonizing personal choice." There was a sudden gasp from the congregation.

"I stand before all of you today to share my decision. With the monumental struggle upon which you are about to engage, because of my love for each and every one of you here in this wondrous cathedral as well as the millions who are watching from their homes, I have chosen not to abandon you." The room instantly filled with dramatic sighs of relief and shouts of "Hallelujah!" from the faithful.

Beaman again raised his arms out from his side and, opening his fist to expose his palm, shouted, "FOR I HAVE THE MARK! YET I WILL STAY!" As prearranged, one of the overhead cameras boomed into position in front of Beaman. As he opened his fist, the camera zoomed in so that his right palm would immediately be seen on the mammoth screens within the cathedral as well as transmitted to all of the homes of the faithful. Beaman's practiced and masterful ability to manipulate the emotions of his followers, leading them as a conductor would lead an orchestra and creating an intensified level of excitement, anxiety, and anger within all of them, backfired as the people in the audience saw clearly on his palm, not the

instantly recognizable mark of Elohim, but instead, another instantly recognizable mark – a mark that many throughout the years had attributed to a force diametrically opposite of God. Emblazoned on his palm, quite different from the mark recently tattooed by Turbo the night of Elohim's announcement, was "666."

The reaction was instantaneous and brutal. The congregation became a mob, flooding out of their rows, down the aisles, and over the seats, until they reached an astonished and bewildered Dick Beaman who did not make a move to protect himself. Person after person, body after body, piled upon him, punching, breaking, and tearing him as he screamed. The television director, for the first time having no script to follow, froze, leaving the most recent shot on the live feed as millions watched one of the leading evangelical preachers in America torn to pieces.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Claire filled her cup with coffee and took another bite from the cheese Danish. It was a pleasant morning in Washington, D.C., and she had decided to have her breakfast on the balcony. Reese, Matthew, and Melissa were still asleep, although it was nearly nine o'clock. Not a particularly late time for the kids to sleep, she thought, but Reese was usually up by six. She and Reese had stayed up until past midnight, watching television and talking. The main topic had been the televangelist, Dick Beaman.

Claire was still haunted by the expression on his face in the last moment just as the angry mob had reached him. For some reason they had tuned in to his broadcast while flipping channels and stayed with it to its horrible conclusion. Claire had maintained he died without ever having a chance to look at this own palm, to see what had triggered the reaction causing his demise. Reese swore he saw Beaman catch a look. The endless replays of the event on the cable news channels, which included digital recordings the networks had obtained of other camera views that were not utilized for the original live feed, did not satisfy either of them, with no clear view to settle the argument.

Reese had been certain that Beaman had Elohim's mark or at least believed he had it. Otherwise, he would not have orchestrated things the way he did. That had confused Claire and concerned Reese. They both wondered if Elohim gave Beaman the mark and then took it away.

Their late evening talks, a regular feature in their marriage, were their way of digesting all of the good and all of the bad happenings in the world and putting them into perspective or, at the very least, trying. Claire reflected upon the fact that it had always been a comforting and satisfying part of her life, the portion of each day she anxiously anticipated. Lately, just the past few days, world events seemed to conspire to overwhelm them and exceed their capacity to process the information. This was not helped by all of the extra time Reese was gone, mostly in meetings with Elohim.

She understood the rationale behind Elohim's decision to maintain a hands-off role as the world seemed to unravel, yet it ran counter to her own feelings. She thought it would be akin to watching a piano drop from a ten-

story window and not shouting a warning to the people below. Reese and she had spent hours debating the point, with him calmly and logically explaining that Elohim had no choice, that intervening would become a constant effort and would inevitably create a dependent, rather than self-reliant, people. He reminded her of their talk after seeing the first *Superman* movie when they had both commented about all of the fires, car crashes, and storm victims around the world who were probably dying horrible, screaming deaths, while Superman flew Lois Lane through the sky over Metropolis, shirking his responsibility to rescue them.

But as she watched her husband closely during the never-ending newscasts, she knew that deep within himself he, too, was troubled by Elohim's choice. She knew him well enough to know he had far too much compassion to ever be able to embrace the pragmatic principles Elohim maintained. On the other hand, she granted it would be impossible for her to ever understand Elohim's perspective. He was, after all, aware of every word, deed, and even every thought of each person on Earth.

Although that particular concept had been taught to Claire from a very young age, the reality of it, after being around Elohim, stretched her ability to comprehend to the limits. She described these feelings to Reese as being "freaked out." From the first day around Elohim, she became quietly obsessed with finding a way to outwit Him, finding a way to have a single private thought while being constantly aware that He was listening in to those desires. Gradually, she adjusted, until reaching the point where she found herself this morning. Rather than attempting to hide her thoughts, she was happy He was listening to them. The knowledge had caused her to clean them up a little and make them better organized, as she would her own living room when company was expected, but that was probably a good thing, she reflected. She now found herself vaguely comforted by the fact that someone accurately knew her opinions, her reasoning, her beliefs, her thoughts, and her emotions. So many of the situations which had gone wrong in the past had been a result of misunderstandings. From *I Love Lucy* to Shakespeare, the misconstrued statement or intent had triggered everything from a good belly laugh to war. 'At least,' Claire thought, 'Elohim doesn't get the wrong picture.'

Her contemplation was interrupted by the opening of the balcony door. Turning, she saw Reese, coffee cup in hand, coming out. “Morning, baby,” she said.

“Hi, honey,” he muttered, obviously still groggy.

“Not a good night?”

“No. Not really. Lots of dreams. I guess you’d really call them nightmares. I couldn’t get that image of Dick Beaman out of my head. Except, in the dream it was happening to me instead of him.”

Claire shivered. “That’s awful.”

“Tell me about it. Anything new happening?”

“I just haven’t felt like turning on the TV yet. I think I’ve OD’d.”

“Yeah,” he said, while chewing a bite of cinnamon roll. “It’s an approach-avoidance thing. While I watch it, I’m unhappy and uncomfortable. If I turn it off, I start wondering what’s going on that I’m not hearing about.”

“It’s just that there’s nothing good happening. It’s all so ugly.”

“Well, it doesn’t take having a degree in psychology or being Elohim to have predicted that. It’s a lot like what happens within a group of friends if one of the group wins the lottery. In no time at all, none of them are speaking to him. They all hate him unless he is one of the rare few who shares it all with his friends; then they continue to like him. Basically, two or three percent of the population just won the eternal lottery. And it’s a prize which can’t be shared.”

“Not a pretty part of our makeup.”

“No, it’s not. But it’s probably hard-wired, going all the way back to our hunter-gatherer days. If one guy in the tribe lucked out and killed a, I don’t know, something big, a mastodon….”

“I don’t think there were any mastodons around at the same time as humans.”

“Whatever. He hit the meat jackpot, won the protein lottery. If he hoarded it, didn’t share it with the tribe, at the very least he was out on his ear. Most likely they would’ve just killed him and then shared his prize. That’s just the way we are.”

“I don’t know. To me it feels more like the seven stages of grief. Different parts of the population are in different stages. Right now there’s a mixture of shock, anger, and fear going on, along with a fair amount of denial.”

“You might be right, especially about the anger part,” Reese agreed. “It’s normal when someone loses a loved one to be angry at the one who died, angry at his or her choices which caused the death, or just angry that the person left. We have the same situation now except the anger is directed at people who haven’t quite left yet.”

“That would explain the unprovoked attacks on people with the mark.”

“Yes. And probably, after Elohim and, uh, the rest leave, depression and guilt will kick in. Eventually, a lot of people will reach the stage of acceptance.”

Reese paused and looked at Claire over the top of his cup for a moment before asking, “Why is it we’re all having a tough time saying ‘after I leave’ or ‘when we leave’? I don’t mean just you and me. I’ve noticed it in Nicholas and Craig. Margo, too.”

“And the kids. I haven’t heard them actually say it other than euphemistically, either. I don’t know. Maybe we don’t really believe it.”

“Or maybe we’re uncomfortable being a part of the Chosen while we’re still here. Do you remember Steve Glinski at Harvard?”

“Yes, he taught in your department.”

“Yeah. He came from a family of five brothers and two sisters.”

“Wow. Not much of that anymore.”

“No. Anyway, he was the only one in the family who attended college, much less graduated. His brothers all worked blue-collar jobs, did quite well. His sisters married blue-collar guys. They all had great homes and happy families, no negative undertones going on. At holiday gatherings Steve would never talk about Harvard or his work, never brought up his college days. In fact, he told me he noticed his grammar and vocabulary downshifted a couple of gears during those visits. He used to tell me it took him a couple of weeks after one of those visits to get his vocabulary back, since he had blocked it out so thoroughly.”

“Why? Had they slammed him at some point in the past?”

“No. I asked. He never once got any of the ‘You think you’re hot shit?’ remarks from any of them. Far as he knew, they were all proud of him and happy for him. It was just something he imposed upon himself. He said he always felt he would be, I don’t know, rubbing their noses in it if he brought it up. You know, the ‘I’ve done something you’ve never done’ sort of thing. You understand what I’m trying to say, Claire?”

“I do. You think mentioning we’re among the Chosen would be gloating. Yeah, it felt funny right now, just saying it to you.”

“I guess.”

Claire looked out on the city. Reese stared at her profile more intently than he would have felt free to do if she were aware of his scrutiny. He had always believed she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met from the first time he saw her at Hawk’s camp. Over the years, as she gained the slight lines and other evidence of the passing of time, she had grown even more beautiful to him. What had started as an instant and substantially physical attraction toward her had become an intense obsession as true love always is, and in all ways: physically, spiritually, and mentally. Countless times in his life, Claire had been his compass, his lover, his friend, his intellectual mate, his own personal devil’s advocate when it was needed, his sounding board, and his protector.

And he trusted her. So many people believed they trusted another, Reese thought, when what they meant was that there was trust as long as it was not truly tested. Some people on this planet were lucky enough to have one person in their lives they could trust fully and completely, no matter what the threat or temptation.

Reese recalled one of his theories of human nature which had sprung from his fertile eighteen-year-old mind. He had not accepted the dogma that mating and child-rearing were the reasons man and woman first formed a family unit. Biologically, he believed, it made more sense for men to roam and spread their seed to as many women as possible, leaving the child-rearing to bands of women.

Reese’s theory was that the family unit, the eventual creation of marriage, was a result of the fact that all people needed to sleep. With sleep being the ultimate vulnerability, especially for cavemen and cavewomen, it

would be important, vital to their very survival, to find someone they could trust, trust enough not to take their food and their belongings while they slept, trust enough not to run away if a threat entered their cave while they slept, trust enough not to kill them to gain possession of their cave.

If those were the criteria for a mate, a partner, Reese reasoned, then it made more sense for it to be a member of the opposite sex. No one of the same gender would be motivated to develop the depth of the bond needed. It was not hard-wired within people to protect their spouses. Reese knew that desire had to be nurtured. But the instinct to protect their own offspring was built into them all, so it made sense to him that men and women would piggyback their own safety onto the natural urge to protect their children. No father or mother would run away when a tiger or enemy approached, leaving the children unprotected. The pragmatic caveman would have realized that the mother of his children would not run away, leaving him unprotected either. So, Reese's final conclusion many years ago was that if people did not need to sleep, there would never have been marriage.

As he stared at Claire, he knew, no matter how big or ferocious the attacker, she would fight to her death to protect him…as he would for her. She turned, seeing his intense gaze, and said, "What's wrong?"

"Why?"

"You're staring at me with the weirdest look on your face. What's the matter?"

Reese chuckled and said, "I was just visualizing you wrestling with a saber-toothed tiger."

"You're not still thinking about that stupid 'Caveman Needs to Sleep' theory of yours, are you?"

"No," he answered quickly. "Of course not."

"Yes, you were," she replied accusatorily. "Give it up, will you? I've told you before, a tiger gets within a hundred yards of our cave, I'm outta there."

א

Margo Jackson, accompanied by a team of four special agents, entered the offices of the Secretary General of the United Nations only to find a lone woman with a bewildered expression. The woman was seated at her desk surrounded by empty cardboard boxes. Looking up, she asked, “Can I help you?”

Showing her ID, Margo smiled gently and replied, “I’m the Assistant Director of the FBI, Margo Jackson.”

“Yes,” said the woman, smiling sheepishly. “I recognize you from the television. What can I do for you?”

“We’re here to see Secretary Kaval. We’d like to ask him some questions.”

Shaking her head, the woman said, “That’s not going to be possible. Secretary Kaval left for his home country last night.”

Trying to conceal her disappointment, Margo asked, “Will he be returning soon?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t speak with him. I just received an e-mail from him.”

“May I see the e-mail, please?”

“I’m not sure,” she responded nervously. “I mean, wouldn’t it be confidential?”

Margo sympathized with the woman. She was clearly out of her element and had obviously just been dropped into an uncertain situation with no warning and no instructions. Turning to her four agents, Margo said, “Why don’t all of you excuse me for a few minutes? Go ahead and wait in the hallway. I’ll be out shortly.” After they left the room, Margo grabbed an empty chair and pulled it next to the desk, sitting down. “What’s your name?”

“Kali,” the woman answered, and Margo shook her hand.

“Kali, are you an American citizen, or did you come from Mr. Kaval’s home?”

“I’m an American.”

“I’m sure you heard the President’s announcement or, at least, heard about it.”

The woman nodded.

“Then you know all of the privileges enjoyed by the UN in the past have been canceled. This building and everyone and everything in it are subject to the same laws as any other office building in the country.”

Again, Kali nodded, saying nothing.

“We have reason to believe your boss, or former boss, I guess, was involved in the attack in Times Square.”

“Oh, no!” Kali exclaimed, a look of genuine shock instantly clouding her face. “That’s horrible.”

“We came to question him today, hoping to give him an opportunity to clear this up. After all, it could be nothing but a massive misunderstanding.”

She nodded again.

“But since he has departed so rapidly….”

“It doesn’t look good.”

“Exactly. But, as long as we’re here,” Margo said, trying to sound casual and friendly, “we might as well talk to you and any others who may have worked closely with Mr. Kaval.”

“I didn’t. I mean, I was just his receptionist, not his secretary or aide. I didn’t even schedule his appointments. He had two men, his aides, both from his home.” Kali’s voice trembled as she spoke.

“Are they here?”

“No. I guess they went with him last night. I tried to reach both of them when I got the e-mail….”

“The e-mail. Yes…Kali, we brought a search warrant.”

Margo started to reach inside her jacket, when the woman said, “Oh, no. You don’t need it. Here, I’ll print it out.” With a couple of mouse clicks, the laser printer began humming and, within seconds, printed out the e-mail which she handed to Margo.

Glancing at the top of the first page, Margo saw that the message to Kali was brief and to the point, informing her he, Kaval, was going home and instructing her to pack everything in his office for transport. When he was established, he would contact her with a location for shipping of the items. The last line of the e-mail thanked her for her service. Margo thought the e-mail was not much help until she noticed the thread of others who had been

sent copies. There were a total of three addresses, none of which were immediately recognizable. Margo assumed two of them were the aides, the third a mystery. Folding it, she tucked it in her jacket pocket and stood.

"Well, Kali, if you don't mind, I would appreciate it if you could step out into the hallway while we search."

"Of course," the receptionist said, standing quickly.

ℵ

"We are here today to right a wrong," said Mario Bonavente, holding a rechargeable screwdriver. Standing with the Cardinal were several priests, representing the major parishes in New York City. On the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the media, invited by the public relations office of the diocese, photographed and taped the event.

Mario turned to the open, massive front doors and, wielding the screwdriver, removed the screws holding the door latches. As the last of the hardware fell from the doors, Bonavente turned to the cameras and assembled parishioners. "Elohim asked us why these doors and the doors of all of our houses of God around the world were locked…why we had installed security alarms within these blessed chambers. He asked if it was our intent to keep out those who may need the solace and inspiration they might find within. We found we did not have a good answer.

"As we gather here today and I remove these latches, bishops and pastors and priests at every Catholic Church on Earth are also removing the latches to their churches. We are also turning off and tearing out the alarms. It is my promise, as well as the promise of His Holiness, that no soul in need of comfort shall ever be turned away from a single one of our churches. No cry for help shall go unheeded. No person craving the counsel of a priest, no matter the hour or the day, shall be turned away. No troubled spirit wishing to confess his or her sins shall ever again be denied that wish."

Pausing, Mario turned back and looked at the beautiful edifice of St. Patrick's. Seizing both of the already opened doors, he flung them wide, turning back to the gathering. "Our doors, as are our arms, are open and

ready to protect and embrace each and every one of you. And they will never be closed again."

א

"Good morning and welcome to this segment of our ongoing coverage," said Kathy Crocker. "As he has every day, Barry Thorndike is joining us this morning. Barry, do you have any comments on the live announcement we've just witnessed from Cardinal Bonavente?"

"Thank you, Kathy. Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. In my personal opinion this is long overdue. As Cardinal Bonavente mentioned in his statement, the decision was a result of the meeting between Elohim and the Pope. We've all been curious as to the nature and content of that meeting, and this is the first glimpse we've received into it. It appears, based upon the single input we've gotten now, that it was something of a course correction for the Church, from Elohim.

"The Catholic Church is run by human beings and has been as susceptible to the pressures and influences from society as everyone else. As a reaction to the crime rates, we have all cocooned, increasing the level of security within our own homes. It appears Elohim has reminded the Church that they do not have this option. He apparently has reminded the Pope that locking their doors at all times except for services is contrary to the stated mission of the institution. I suspect that this will be the first of other changes we will see coming from the Vatican.

"Kathy, as a side note, I had an opportunity to speak with a member of Cardinal Bonavente's staff late yesterday and was told that in the last forty-eight hours, they have been deluged with requests from men who wish to join the priesthood."

"That's fascinating, Barry," Crocker answered. "Did they happen to mention any numbers? How many requests have they received?"

"With everything going on right now, they haven't had a chance to get a handle on this unexpected development, but he did mention that it was in the thousands."

"Wow! Amazing! Well, thank you for your perspective on this. I was about to describe our next story as one of our top stories, but with events

occurring at such a rapid pace, we have so many top stories right now that it's difficult to prioritize them. An event which certainly has captured the attention of the world today was the mob-killing of television evangelist, Dick Beaman. We were able to speak with some of the top people within his former organization last night and early this morning and made some surprising discoveries. As our guest this morning, we have the producer of Dick Beaman's weekly televised program and one of the people present in the control room during the attack last night, Ron Grant. Good morning, Ron."

"Kathy, it's not a particularly good morning for me today."

"Of course. It must have been quite an ordeal for you and your staff last night."

"That would be an understatement."

"Ron, what exactly can you tell us about the mysterious mark on Mr. Beaman's hand?"

"Well, Kathy, I can tell you the mark Dick held up for the camera at the end of the, uh, program last night was not the mark I saw just an hour before we went on the air."

"What do you mean?"

"Dick Beaman had Elohim's mark. I saw it, as did several other staffers. In fact, we have it on tape."

"That's what I understand. We would like to show the tape now. Ron, could you please explain for our audience when it was recorded."

"Certainly. We always do a taped rehearsal of the program earlier the same day. This is the tape of that rehearsal."

Kathy Crocker watched as her monitor displayed the same scene millions had watched the day before, except this time there was no audience. Ron Grant narrated, "We're starting the tape at the point in the program just before Dick revealed his mark."

The screen showed Beaman standing on the raised platform, the crystal crucifix shimmering behind him, as he was saying, *"I stand before all of you today to share my decision. With the monumental struggle upon which you are about to engage, because of my love for each and every one of you*

here in this cathedral as well as the millions watching from their homes, I have chosen not to abandon you."

The scene seemed surreal to the viewers, as Beaman's voice echoed off the empty walls of the cathedral. Both Crocker and Ron Grant watched quietly as Beaman raised his arms and opened his fist, proclaiming, *"FOR I HAVE THE MARK! YET I WILL STAY!"* The camera had, in preparation for the moment, zoomed in for a close-up of Beaman's right hand. As he opened it, clearly visible on his palm was the now-familiar mark of Elohim. The news director froze the picture on the image, which lingered on the screens of the viewers for several moments before he cut back to Kathy.

"That is certainly Elohim's mark."

"It is. Dick was incredibly proud that he was one of the Chosen. He showed it to all of us. He also agonized over his decision. But he told us that he had an obligation to remain with his followers, that they would need his help."

"Ron, what you do think happened to the mark?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that Elohim gave Dick Beaman the mark, and, I guess, maybe because Dick decided to turn down the invitation, he was punished."

"You think Elohim changed the mark to the '666' which we all saw last night? Do you think he changed it just because Dick Beaman was going to refuse to go to Heaven?"

"I'm not saying He did, and I'm not saying He didn't. I just can't think of any other explanation."

א

Turbo, whose real name was Delbert McClanahan, switched off the news broadcast and reached for his cell phone, punching the numbers for directory assistance.

א

As was her custom, Ricki Darling briskly walked into Margo Jackson's office without announcement. Margo, reading the summaries of reports

from field agents assigned to follow up leads on the Times Square incident, looked up at her. “Ricki, please tell me you have something.”

Dropping a single page on the Assistant Director’s desk, Ricki explained, “Two of the e-mail addresses are, as you guessed, Kaval’s aides. The third might be a surprise.”

There were times Ricki’s flair for the dramatic was irritating to Margo. This was one of them. Picking up the paper, she glanced at the list, and her irritation was replaced instantly with incredulity and excitement. “Stavros!”

“One and the same,” answered Darling, pleased with the response.

“Son of a…. This is going to make some waves!”

“You think?”

Margo pressed the intercom button for Bill Burke’s office.

ℵ

Suri Kaval’s personal attendant awoke him gently. “Sir, we’re about fifteen minutes from Prague.”

He opened his eyes and thanked her, picking up the cup of coffee she had brought and sipping it loudly. His first waking thoughts were to wonder if the fools at the FBI had gotten their hands on his e-mail. With satisfaction he visualized William Stavros’ indignation and outrage when the imperialist thugs showed up at his office with their search warrant. If only he could be a fly on the wall, he thought, and watch his fellow conspirator rant and rave as they ransacked his personal effects. Kaval resigned himself to only being able to play out the scene in his mind.

Stavros, he reflected, had served his purposes well. His wealth and his passion were convenient assets to be utilized. His fanaticism as well as his desire to control everything had played perfectly into Kaval’s hand. Suri never ceased to be amazed how someone as intelligent and cynical as Stavros could have been so gullible, swallowing each saccharine morsel of anti-U.S. propaganda, as an altar boy would take each word from a priest as coming directly from God.

Kaval, through Stavros, had accomplished a major restructuring of the political landscape in the United States. Although Stavros believed, at

Kaval's urging, that they were creating a new and enlightened political party, interested in only the health, safety, and well-being of all people, especially children, the reality was quite different. In fact, Suri thought, what they had created was an ugly, adversarial, nasty, and mean-spirited movement in the culture of the United States – a movement which was fanatically, obsessively intolerant of all who disagreed, which found fault in every action performed by the United States, which believed that the United States was the cause of nearly all of the problems on Earth and that if its government would only drop all of the nationalistic, imperialistic, and isolationistic practices, the world could be utopian.

Together he and Stavros had managed to create a philosophical construct which made it seem cruel and xenophobic for the people of the U.S. to cling to their own language, their own traditions, their own beliefs. The two of them had even managed, Kaval reflected with satisfaction, to make it seem evil for the United States to defend itself when attacked. All of this was accomplished under the guise of not offending others, not making others uncomfortable.

They had been so easy to manipulate, he thought – an entire country of people, whose minds were filled with the idealistic, illogical concepts of the hippie movement of the 1960s, actually believing that the sappy lyrics of "Imagine," the John Lennon song, could be a literal blueprint for the world to follow. Reality, Kaval contemplated, was a concept with which modern U.S. citizens were never comfortable. No massive military force was required to neuter the might of the United States. All it took was television, showing the U.S. people the reality of using their own troops and equipment against others. In reality, battles and wars were not won with precision; they were won by inflicting widespread and indiscriminate horror upon the other side, such hideous and unimaginable horror that the enemy was either completely broken by the onslaught or so traumatized that it could not conceive of angering the same opponent again.

The United States once knew this fact, Kaval thought, as it participated in the wars against Germany and Japan. Germany was nearly annihilated from the constant bombing by the United States and its allies. There was not even a feeble attempt to protect the women and children, no desire to save

the historic landmarks of the enemy or to be respectful of the physical manifestations of the nation's heritage. Indeed, to some degree, it was the loss of many of these things that prompted the Germans to surrender. And Japan, Kaval knew, for generations to come, would not psychologically or emotionally recover from the reality of the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Those were victories. And those victories caused Germany and Japan to resolve never to fight the United States again. Those were the last examples of true, effective warfare fought by the United States. Every military effort since 1945 had been crippled by the weak stomach of the public. The arbitrary lines drawn and the restrictive rules of engagement implemented for the Korean and Viet Nam wars made it impossible to effectuate a true victory. The attempt to fight in Iraq, killing and maiming only combatants, was absurd when none of the combatants wore uniforms. Why would they don a uniform, Suri wondered, when doing that would be tantamount to painting a target on their own chests?

For Suri, there was much irony in the events of the past two decades. He delighted in encouraging and nurturing the concept of "diversity," knowing full well, and even alluding to it in his final speech, that diversity, by its very definition, would create divisiveness. Multiculturalism was the solvent which dissolved the binding glue of a society, leaving it splintered and without the will to effectively oppose an outside force.

Suri Kaval was quite satisfied with his work in the United States. It was now a country of anger and disgust, imbued with self-directed hatred, rather than a country of pride and self-confidence. It was now a country of enclaves, each loyal only to itself – a country where the liberals and conservatives, smokers and nonsmokers, fat and thin, gay and straight, bicycle riders and car drivers, religious and atheists, men and women, blacks, whites, browns, and reds all placed themselves above the whole, above the country. Their loyalties were to themselves first, their small groups second, their families third, and perhaps selectively for a cause they personally agreed with, they would associate themselves with the United States.

‘It’s funny,’ he thought with amusement, ‘how important perspective can be.’ Not that long ago, for the vast majority of people within the United States, the thought of being a United States citizen instilled pride. Today, for most, it brought shame, shame to the degree that millions within that once powerful country could not even proclaim that identity aloud and were angry and derisive toward those who did.

Suri Kaval felt the wheels of the jet gently touch the tarmac as his thoughts returned to today. His work was nearly done. The internal strife, the recriminations, the further segmenting of this once powerful and monolithic nation would continue as the details of William Stavros’ participation in the Times Square attack were carefully, meticulously released. No overt military-style attack would be needed. There would not even be an internal civil war. The U.S. would succumb to a cancer that had been planted and cultivated within its national character – a cancer that would consume the underlying scaffolding of nationalism, leaving behind only a fragmented and uninspired husk.

When Elohim arrived just a few days ago, Kaval thought back, his first reaction to that arrival was one of fury. It did not take long, as “His” plan was revealed, for Kaval to recognize his good fortune. So many of the men and women who would be obstacles to his own plan, those whom Kaval would have destroyed or assassinated if not for the sheer number of them, were about to voluntarily depart. Tomorrow night! It was tantamount to all of the key officers and enlisted being stripped from a military force on the eve of a battle.

Kaval had worried, at first, that Elohim would intervene. There was a brief, agonizing period in those initial few hours when Kaval believed that his deepest thoughts had been plumbed by Elohim, that the fate of the young man, Sheffield, was his destiny as well. When the avenging angel did not arrive, Suri realized that Elohim’s stated intention not to interfere might be sincere. Yet, he knew he could not proceed on his plans without testing Elohim’s resolve. The smaller attacks in Europe as well as the major attack in Times Square served that purpose. Fully prepared to lose the men and the infrastructure needed to carry out the attacks, Suri, to his delight, watched as the killings proceeded without the hand of Elohim stopping them.

He now knew he was safe and unfettered, able to proceed toward his ultimate goal. The killings had been on a grand enough scale to prove that. There would be no Heavenly visit, no anointed sword to cut him down, nothing to stop him from triggering the final demise of the United States and its allies. The others, of course, would all topple immediately once their benefactor and protector fell into disarray. Kaval felt the jet come to a stop and glanced out his window, seeing the steps rolling up to the side of his plane. A small group waited several yards away for his arrival. He began to gather his things.

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"There had been no mark," Elohim told Reese, "placed by me."

"I saw it," countered Reese. "So did many others."

"What you saw on Beaman's hand was not my mark."

Reese hesitated momentarily. He was, once again, in the private quarters at the State Department, sitting at the small dining table across from Elohim. Dick Beaman had been the first topic of conversation brought up by Reese. Realizing the truth, Reese stated, "He put the mark on himself."

Elohim nodded.

"The replacement of it…the appearance of the three sixes?"

"That was I."

Reese stared deeply into Elohim's blue eyes, trying to read them. He finally said, "There are people out there who believe that the original mark was Yours, that You took it away as punishment because he had decided to stay behind."

"No such misunderstanding will remain. They will soon know the truth."

"It's just…I don't know. Why did You do it? I mean, why didn't You just erase his mark? Why the '666'? You had to know what would happen. It seems so…."

"Ungodly?" Elohim offered with a slight smile.

Sighing, Reese answered, "I guess."

“Reese, when we first began to speak, you and others were troubled because I was not acting godlike enough then. Do you recall?”

“I do.”

“Yet, in those conversations I was not the God of the Armageddon…of Revelation, bringing down upon the people great destruction and despair. Now, I disappoint you because I have chosen to punish and make an example of a single evil man.”

Reese smiled and asked, “You’re not complaining because You just can’t win, are You?”

“Hardly,” Elohim answered, a grin spreading across his face. “However, you should remember my response to you when asked if I was God.”

“Your answer was that our definition of God had become inaccurate.”

“Which is quite true. You see, man has a tendency to create his own personal God, a God who is strongest in the areas where man is the weakest. Someone who is troubled by the actions of others and feels impotent to oppose them sees God as a mighty, vengeful warrior. A person who has suffered from the unfair judgment of others sees God as a wise and all-knowing deity. One who struggles with a fiery temper, unable to allow even the meekest slight to pass by without lashing out, sees God as a pacifist who always turns the other cheek, no matter the offense.”

“And what about me? What type of God did I create?”

Elohim smiled broadly. “You, my child, have created a God with powerful, deep, and intense emotions that flow freely yet never conflict or give rise to dilemmas.”

Reese cocked his head to the side, like a curious golden retriever, and said, “Emotions, huh?”

“Yes.”

“I have a problem with emotions?”

“I know.”

“No! That was a question.”

“It is normal for a person gifted with your intellect to shun emotions, to be uncomfortable with them. There have been far too many times in your life when emotions led you down a path you regretted. Had you relied upon

your intellect, you would not have chosen the same path. You have learned to trust your mind and not your heart."

Reese considered Elohim's words for a time before asking, "Getting back to our discussion, why the '666' on Beaman?"

"That can be best answered by harkening back to your lecture the morning of the day we met. You were interrupted by Megan Mislin. Your response to her was to explain the importance of rules as well as the fact that most rules are never enforced. Do you recall?"

"Yes."

"You also mentioned that some people only follow rules out of fear."

"I remember. And it's true."

"Of course it is. And instilling fear is a two-step process. Step one is to make the rule known. Step two is to show what will happen if you break it. I fulfilled the first step during my statement by asking people not to be tempted to mark themselves."

"Yes, but You only told them that it would be a waste of time, that it wouldn't get them into Heaven."

"True. Therefore, I discovered that a clarification and an illustration of the punishment were needed, both of which had to be widely and quickly disseminated. If I had simply removed the bogus mark from Mr. Beaman's palm, even just prior to his dramatic moment, what would have occurred?"

"He would probably have been embarrassed."

"Yes, he would have been…but only momentarily. He possessed a quick wit. I promise you that the instant he learned of the erasure, he would have concocted an event which would have further embellished his original story."

"You're probably right. He would have told his congregation of a conversation with You before the service, informing You of his decision, and apparently You had decided to remove the mark."

"Something of that nature, yes. Remember, he had the mark on video tape, and he made certain there were several witnesses."

"That's true."

"I considered using other marks, something a bit more benign."

“Like Betty Boop?”

Elohim laughed. “Not that image specifically, no. But others. None seemed suitable. All of the available choices presented Beaman with a possible avenue for rationalization. Remember, his congregation deeply wanted to believe in him.”

Realization sunk into Reese. In a soft voice he asked, “You actually needed them to kill him, didn’t You? Before he could have time to come up with a new story? The drama of his death would also fulfill the second requirement of immediate and broad dissemination.”

By reading Elohim’s face, Reese knew he was correct. Elohim responded, “The world is filled with many Dick Beamans, great and small. He was not the only one to forge the mark upon himself. Beaman and the others did not believe for a moment that doing so would get them into Heaven. Their sole intent was to gain the prestige of being identified as members of the Chosen who decided to make the supreme sacrifice, who decided to stay behind. They did this only to garner power, influence, and, in some cases, wealth at the expense of the faithful. I could not allow this exploitation to occur in what would be, in the minds of many, my name. How many of the others with a deceitful mark will now be tempted to capitalize on it?”

“Few, if any. Have You tampered with any others?”

“Yes, I have. Some of the others with counterfeit marks have had them erased. There have been some substitutions, and some I’ve left intact. Those I’ve left with the marks will discover tomorrow night, when we depart and as they attempt to remove them to apparently fulfill my promise, that their marks remain as they are for the rest of their lives. Their deceit will define them for all of their days.”

Reese, troubled by what he heard, decided to pursue a line of questions he had earlier dismissed. “There’s no point in asking if You mind that I am candid, since my thoughts are already known to You.”

“No, there isn’t. Ask your question.”

“You don’t seem to have a problem striking out at mankind, stopping an action or punishing one after the fact, if the offense directly or indirectly relates to You. Yet, You did nothing to prevent the deaths of 18,000 people

in Times Square. I know we've discussed this before, but I'm just having a problem reconciling Your positions. Dick Beaman's crime or sin, or whatever You want to call it, certainly does not rise to the level of those who planned and executed that massacre or the others in Europe. And the reasoning that You made a rule and he broke it doesn't hold up, either. I believe 'Thou shalt not kill' is one of Your rules, also?"

"Reese, as usual your question is a profound one. And, frankly, that you ask it concerns me. It is the belief in the Creator, as well as the belief in Heaven, which is the basis of faith for millions around the world. Whenever there is widespread belief, there will be organized study of the belief as well as organized opposition to it. It is important to me that I not act in a manner that provides a truly negative interpretation to those who study the faith. It is also important to me that I not provide deliberately or inadvertently any fodder to those who oppose the faith. If you, knowing me as you do and possessing the intelligence that you have, conclude that I am a hypocrite…."

"Wait a minute, Elohim. I didn't…."

"You didn't what, Reese? Actually say it? Does that matter to me?"

Reese, feeling extremely uncomfortable, said, "You're right. That was my thought. I'm sorry, I guess, for thinking that."

"You need not apologize. As I explained, I have great respect for your mind. If my actions or lack thereof result in your coming to that conclusion, others will as well. And for that perspective I am grateful."

"I'm Your canary in the mineshaft?"

Amused, Elohim responded, "In a sense, you are. Certainly you are my barometer, warning me of a change in the weather. To provide you with an answer to your question, I will ask one."

"How unusual," Reese said, hoping his comment was taken as the joke it was intended to be.

Instead, Elohim's eyes bored into Reese's. "Have we become too familiar?"

Taken aback, Reese said, "I'm not sure what You mean."

"Reese, contrary to popular myth, I do not seek reverence. To seek it, to solicit it, to demand it, and to punish those who do not give it is an ugly

trait. There have been many men and women in Earth's history who have chosen this path, and they are not among the best of mankind. However, I, just as do you, believe that respect is a healthy, positive thing to both give and to receive. Sarcasm is not a tool used for the expression of respect."

Reese, grappling with the discomfort this morning's meeting was creating within him, said, "I meant no disrespect, Elohim." He paused, taking a deep breath and sighing heavily. "There are times when talking with You can be disconcerting."

"You've grown accustomed to the other party in your conversations relying entirely upon what you say."

"Of course I have. That has always been my reality. The privacy of my mind is a place where I can differentiate between the Reese Johnson I am and the Reese Johnson I wish to be. What I allow myself to speak is a reflection of the latter."

"From my perspective both are the true Reese Johnson. The fact that you continue your attempts to improve upon yourself is an admirable trait which can only be perceived by looking into your thoughts. There are many for whom there is no such distinction."

"The part of me who wishes to become a better person would like to apologize to You for my thoughts. The other part of me believes apologizing for one's thoughts is absurd."

Finally, Elohim smiled. "For the truly vital and vibrant minds, thoughts happen. Even the most sincere pacifists will suddenly find their minds filled with visions of killing those who anger them. The presence of the thoughts does not make them murderers; acting upon the thoughts does. The part of you disinclined to apologize is the wiser part. I did not express offense until your thoughts cleared your built-in filter and were spoken. For, you see, thoughts that remain within your head are capricious and beyond your control. Speaking them, however, is a conscious and deliberate decision."

"In that case, I can sincerely apologize."

"Accepted. Now, if I may continue, I would like to answer your question by asking one of you."

Elohim paused, gazing at Reese, who smiled and said nothing.

After a moment, Elohim, also grinning, said, “That was much better. I congratulate you on your restraint.”

“It was nothing,” answered Reese. “Please, Your question.”

Elohim laughed softly, shaking his head. “I must say it was most entertaining watching your thought process. I counted at least nine versions of what you wanted to say right then before you chose the one you spoke.”

“Did You have a favorite?” asked Reese, continuing to grin.

“I did, actually. ‘Please, I eagerly await yet another question’ was my favorite of the selections.” Again, Elohim paused before asking, “And you, did you have a favorite?”

“You already know my favorite. And, even though we are alone, even though I know You are reading my thoughts as clearly as I read them myself, I’ll not be saying my favorite aloud.”

“Fair enough,” Elohim said, amid his laughter. He took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. “The very survival of the best among mankind depends upon a clear recognition of the malignancy growing on the Earth. To truly combat the evil, people must grasp not only the extremes to which they will go but the breadth of this group. As so many ascribe an all-knowing omnipotence to me, were I to punish those directly responsible for the attacks against the faithful, would they not believe the malignancy had been eradicated from the organism and was no longer a threat to them?”

“Yes. I can see they would. Of course, You always have the option of actually doing that, actually removing all of the malignancy. I, of course, recall Your answer that the bad part of our society is necessary to nurture and produce the future Chosen, yet it seems to me that the removal of this one extreme bad group among us would create a power vacuum, just as will the removal of the good who depart with You tomorrow. My own knowledge of human nature tells me that others would rise up, or perhaps a better phrase would be ‘dive down,’ to fill the void. Other ‘badness’ would certainly spring forth. At least, if You wiped out this group, you might be compensating for causing the removal of the good influence…balancing the scales.”

For only the second time since they had met, Elohim appeared to consider Reese’s argument rather than provide the usual, immediate

explanation. As Elohim reflected, Reese relaxed, sitting back in his chair and glancing around the room, not wanting to intrude upon his thoughts. Although Reese had not looked at his watch, he guessed nearly two minutes had passed before Elohim spoke again. “Reese, if you were in my position, what do you think would be the most important prerequisite for interacting with your creation?”

Without hesitation, Reese answered, “Wisdom.”

A slight smile curled one corner of Elohim’s lips. “Many would say compassion.”

“I’m not ‘many.’ I believe compassion can be its own best punishment.”

“Please explain.”

“Probably the best example would be a basic family – a husband, wife, and two or three children. The mother or the father is filled with compassion…cannot stand to see the misery of strangers and brings them in…as, let’s say, foster children. Before bringing in these additional children, the family had enough resources to provide themselves with shelter, food, clothing, educational opportunities, everything. The addition of the foster children stretches the resources too thin. The parents can no longer afford good nutrition for everyone, can no longer afford good medical care, can no longer afford college for their own kids. In a thousand ways the children of the original family suffer, not the least of which being the dilution of attention they would have received from their parents. By exercising a true and admirable compassion – by helping others – the parents have damaged their own children. This lesson can be extrapolated to include an entire society which attempts, out of compassion, to provide more help to the needy than it can afford.”

“You are suggesting that the parents prioritize…that they place the welfare of their own children above the welfare of strangers. Is not the inherent cruelty of your opinion comparable to that which you accuse me of doing?”

“I suppose that it is. But I believe the alternative is worse.”

“Should there be no compassion in your world?”

“That is why I chose wisdom a minute ago. Compassion must be tempered with wisdom. Of course strangers must be helped; we discussed

this shortly after we began our meetings. But the help must be for the truly needy. It must not breed dependence. And what is given must not exceed the *true surplus* resources of a family."

"Your choice of wisdom, rather than intelligence, is intriguing. How do you view the difference between them?"

Shrugging, Reese answered, "Perhaps it is all personal semantics. To me, intelligence is pure knowledge and the application of knowledge. If the 'artificial-intelligence' people ever make any true progress with computers, the best they can eventually hope for is an 'intelligent' computer. I don't think a 'wise' computer can be built."

"I disagree."

"You do?"

"I do. There sits before me a wise computer which I have built."

"Touché. Let me just say a wise computer will never be built by man."

"Then what is wisdom?"

"Wisdom is a balance. Pure intelligence has no moral boundaries; in fact, it resents and resists boundaries. It does not recognize or acknowledge the realities of human nature. It is unfettered by compassion. It was pure intelligence which led many scientists to propose eugenics just a few years ago. It was pure intelligence which caused scientists to discover and create the mechanisms, processes, and chemical combinations which have killed many, polluted much, and are possibly causing global warming. And as this same group of the purely intelligent observe the damage they have enabled, rather than taking responsibility, they blame mankind for the abuses. Wisdom, on the other hand, allows not only for the invention, discovery, or creation of new things, it simultaneously understands the potential for their inevitable abuse."

"You do not feel that scientists are aware of the potential for the abuse of their breakthroughs?"

"Actually, I do believe they are aware. But there is a difference between being aware and making yourself responsible for what occurs. Parents know not to place a loaded gun in the hands of their child. The result is inevitable. Yet scientists place into the hands of people – people who do not share their level of understanding – pharmaceuticals, automobiles, insecticides,

chemical processes used in factories, weapons, aerosols, and a multitude of other technologies which have the potential for immense harm, and then act surprised and even outraged at the consequences. In my analogy, if the child uses the pistol to shoot another child, the parents are held liable. There is no such accountability for scientists who have armed us with much worse. Scientists are not the only culprits, although science is an area of society which attracts and nurtures intelligence for the sake of intelligence."

"Reese, you mentioned that wisdom is a balance. In your opinion, a balance between intelligence and what? Compassion? Emotion?"

"Reality. Pure intelligence has a way of proceeding without regard for reality. That's how scientists get so far afield, announcing they've proved the existence of something or other, but when you read the proof, you discover it requires the presence of nineteen dimensions. Never mind the fact that none of us can observe more than three dimensions, and none of them can explain what those other dimensions might be."

"Isn't that the beauty of abstract reasoning? Wouldn't adhering too closely to reality result in the hampering of creativity?"

"You're right, of course. The ability to see beyond the obvious, to perceive and understand the hidden, is a cornerstone of intelligence. However, there is a difference between not being a slave to reality and discarding it completely."

"So, it is your wish for scientists to appoint themselves the arbiters of what the rest of mankind is capable of handling? Isn't that the very hubristic mentality which you rail against?"

"What I rail against are the people who want to decide, for me, how I should live my life. In most cases they want to protect me from my own decisions. There is a huge difference between informing me that…I don't know…trans fats are bad for me and the act of actually banning trans fats."

"Perhaps," said Elohim, with the slight smile returning, "you are actually underestimating their grasp of human nature? On one hand, you claim they are being irresponsible for creating trans fat in their laboratory and releasing it upon an unsuspecting public without being accountable for its impact. On the other hand, when scientists attempt to undo the damage they've done by working to remove their invention from the marketplace,

you accuse them of being patriarchal and dictatorial. Reese, admit it, you simply resent being treated the same, lumped into the same group as the masses."

Reese's jaw clenched and unclenched repeatedly for a few moments. He had not realized how passionate he had become on this topic. "You're saying I'm an intellectual snob?"

"Aren't you?"

"No! Well, yes! It's not that simple."

"Explain it to me, Reese. I believe I am capable of understanding."

Reese struggled to crystallize his thoughts, finally saying, "There is a difference. I mean, I said earlier that it's bad for a parent to place a gun into the hands of a child. It isn't bad to place one into the hands of an intelligent, mature adult. I guess a lot of the efforts to control our lives are a result of the mishandling and abuse of those technologies by the dopes."

"The rules of society have always been constructed to manage and protect the lowest common denominator."

"I guess You're right. I do resent being protected from myself because of the idiocy of others."

"And you've suffered from that your whole life."

"I have."

"If you were the ruler, what would you do? Would you remove the invasive protections which you find so repugnant, allowing the 'dopes,' to use your word, to maim and destroy themselves and others? And, if so, would you then not be equally guilty of a failure to acknowledge the reality of human nature? For the people who do not require *their* pill bottles to be equipped with child-proof caps because they would be conscientious enough to store the bottle away from the reach of children, there are others who would allow their children to use the pill bottles as toys. Even if your argument would be, and I know it is not, that natural selection should be allowed to proceed within your society, thereby eliminating the parents who would allow children to play with the pill bottle, it would not be the parents who die from the overdose, but the children. And you know, more than most, that one of those children could very easily possess the fruitful combination of genetics to rise above his or her parents one day."

“As I said, it isn’t that simple,” Reese maintained, this time with less passion.

“Reese, more than any other time in your life, your defining moment was at the Awakening of the Spirit Camp. Ironically, it was there you discovered the true power of your mind. And you discovered how superior you were to most others. As you saw not only how easily they were swayed by Reverend Hawk, but also how easily you were able to turn them against him, your contempt for them was inevitable.”

“You know…well, of course You know, as I was reprogramming them, I realized I could have gotten them to kill him. I was a teenager, for Pete’s sake, and I could have manipulated them to commit murder.”

Reese’s eyes gazed into the distance. A deep, troubling expression clouded his face. In a soft, nearly inaudible voice, he said, “God, I hated them. I hated them for their softness. I hated them for their willingness to hand over control of their lives to him and then to me. I hated them for their stupidity.”

“I know.”

“There were several times when I nearly took Claire and just left, leaving them to their moronic leader and his moronic teachings. I almost left them behind, not caring about the abuse and exploitation. They were so willing and eager to be abused and exploited, I nearly convinced myself that they deserved it.”

“But you didn’t. You didn’t leave. You didn’t abandon them. I explained earlier, a thought is not an offense; it is not a sin. Do not blame yourself for your thoughts.”

“I did more than think it. I planned it, out loud, with Claire. I went through the conscious process of turning the thought into words.”

“You shared your thoughts only with Claire. Sharing thoughts with your true mate is not only an exception to the rule, it is a necessity if the relationship is to be ideal. The fact remains that you did not act upon the urge.”

Reese finally looked back at Elohim. “May I ask You a question?”

Elohim gazed intently back at Reese and said, “The answer to your unspoken question is ‘no.’ Not a single person whom you saved from the

camp today bears my mark."

Reese looked down at the table and said nothing.

"Do you feel vindicated?" Elohim asked.

"Actually, no," replied Reese. "I always hoped at least one person from that group would have been…."

"Worth saving?"

"I suppose."

"My child, they were all worth saving in their own way. If it is any comfort to you, some of them have done very good things. Two of them have each produced offspring who do bear the mark. One of those two was given the name *Reese*."

Reese leaned far back in his chair, tilting it away from the table while rubbing his face vigorously.

Elohim continued, "The farmer does not know, when he spreads his seed, which eventually will produce the sweetest fruit. You saved them all because you had no way of knowing which would be the best. Furthermore, the enormous feat itself, saving them all, inspired the few to go farther than they may have gone without that inspiration."

Leaning forward, dropping his chair back onto all four legs, Reese said, "We've come a long way this morning from our original discussion. I believe we digressed when You asked me to define the most important attribute of a deity. My question remains. Why not eradicate the evil from Earth, at least the group responsible for the killings? Why not level the playing field for the time after You leave?"

Elohim looked sad. Pausing briefly, he answered, "Would all of the drug safeguards now implemented have occurred if I had not allowed the gross disfiguring of infants from Thalidomide? I could have easily prevented the entire incident. If I had, there would have been others. It was the sheer horror that the drug caused which prompted vast changes in the system. Had the changes not been made, I would have been forced to intervene time and time again, protecting mankind from reckless advances. Repeated intervention does not produce maturity or wisdom; it only postpones them. Just as a spoiled child does not mature, neither does an entire species. To place it on a much more practical level, one that touches each of you on a

daily basis, what do you believe would happen if I were to intervene at the moment of impact of every automobile accident in the world, allowing the offending driver to become injured or killed, but saving the innocent victims? Would my actions result in the roadways experiencing more or less collisions?"

"I'm not sure," Reese replied. "On one hand, the number of bad drivers would be diminished. On the other, people would feel less responsible for their actions. I guess, knowing people as well as I do, there would be an increase."

"I, too, believe there would be an increase. People who operate a vehicle poorly rarely concern themselves with their own safety. The only measurable effect on drivers is the concern for others. I asked you earlier what the most important trait for a deity would be. Your answer was wisdom, and I certainly cannot find fault with your answer. However, I would suggest another. I believe constancy, certainty, and consistency are critical. There must be a dependability not only in which events I choose to alter but in all of the workings of your world. Without it, the uncertainty of life would be overwhelming. People must know, beyond any doubt, that when they drop an apple, it will fall to the ground. They must also know that when they face a threat, their survival depends upon their own courage, strength, and wits. No hand will come down from above and save them. Without that certainty, there would be no impetus to develop or possess the courage or the strength or the wits. To self-actualize, a person must become self-reliant. To become self-reliant, a person must grasp the absolute certainty, the inevitability of consequences for his or her actions."

Shaking his head, Reese replied, "I believe I need to give up on changing Your mind in this area. I seem to be spinning my wheels."

Elohim did not immediately respond. Curious as to why, Reese looked closely at him, seeing the distant flicker in his eyes, the same effect he had noticed before.

"Elohim?"

Elohim did not reply.

"Elohim, are You all right?"

Reese saw the blue eyes return to normal as they seemed to again focus on him.

"Elohim, what is that all about? Do You go somewhere for a moment?"

Elohim, seeming to be re-acclimating himself to his surroundings, answered, "As you know, I receive much input every moment."

"I've always meant to ask You how that works. Is it like having a television on in the background?"

"To use your comparison, it would be like having a billion televisions on in the background."

Reese whistled softly. "How can You stand it? How can You think?"

"As I told you in our first discussion, it is all written…all saved for me so that I may refer to it at my choosing. Consequently, that frees me to focus on my immediate surroundings, if I wish."

"So You tune it out?"

"The answer to that is both 'yes' and 'no.' Perhaps the best way to describe what I do is 'skim,' as you would skim a book you are reading. Each thought, word, or deed from the world touches my mind, just as each word on the page is seen by your eyes. It is not until I give a specific source my complete attention that the full details are absorbed. Typically, when I am not interacting with you or the others, it all receives that attention."

"But something just grabbed Your attention, didn't it?"

"Yes. There are certain events, deeds, words, or thoughts which capture it regardless of my focus at the time."

"And this particular one, if I may ask?"

Elohim appeared to be deciding something before he answered. "This particular one was most disquieting."

"In what way?"

"It seems our enemies are not content with the damage they've done."

"In all of our discussions, You have never once used the word *our*, only *your*, as in 'your society,' ' your problems,' ' your situation.' Why do You now say 'our enemies'?"

"Because it is accurate. They are your enemies because they wish you harm. They are mine because they…or at least one of them has eternally

been."

The room suddenly felt colder for Reese. "Are you referring to…?"

"I am. And I am afraid what has transpired thus far is but a prelude."

Reese felt anger rising within him. Shaking his head, he asked, "Please don't tell me You can't, at the very least, warn us, allow us to be prepared, to react."

Elohim's face mirrored the anger felt by Reese. "I cannot."

Chapter Thirty

William Stavros fumed as he slammed the receiver back onto the cradle. “Bastards!” he shouted to himself, frustrated with the turn of events, as he now found himself sitting in a small office within his own headquarters. The room had been stripped of everything, including his computer, filing cabinets, desk, even his telephone. A basic chair, empty desk, and a different telephone had been brought in for his use as the army of FBI agents proceeded to ransack his offices. His first phone call had been to his lawyers, and they were on their way. After completing that call, Stavros had begun calling his contacts: senators, representatives, governors, party leaders, anyone he thought could be of help in calling off this search. He was greeted, at each office he called, by a polite yet firm FBI agent who informed him there was an ongoing investigation occurring at this time, and the senator, or whomever he was calling, should be free to return the call in a few hours.

No one was saying anything. No one would tell him even the reason for the search. But it was obviously a coordinated effort, centering on him and extending to all of his personal and professional contacts. His frustration was compounded by the fact that they took his cell phone which held all of the private and cell phone numbers of some of the most influential of his acquaintances. That left Stavros no option but to use directory assistance and call the public lines of their offices like some plebeian jerk. He continued reassuring himself that there would be hell to pay when he finally reconnected with his people.

The door to the small office opened, and Davis Bean and Jill Handleman hurriedly entered. “It’s about goddamned time you got here!” Stavros shouted at them.

Bean was a tall, slender black man, who had played basketball at Duke University while obtaining his law degree. He responded first, “We got here as quickly as possible, Mr. Stavros, and felt that determining the cause for this warrant took precedence over greeting you.”

Stavros calmed slightly. “You talked to them? Why is this happening?”

The FBI agents had only put one chair in the room, so Bean and Handleman both stood. It was Handleman who answered, “Apparently, they have evidence linking you to the Times Square attack.” She had deliberately phrased her statement bluntly, hoping for a revealing reaction. As a criminal litigation specialist, she had learned years earlier that many clients do not always share the truth with their attorneys. Her ploy had worked. Rather than the explosion of outrage expected from an innocent man accused of such an atrocity, Stavros fell momentarily quiet, his face reddening and his jaw visibly tightening. When he did speak, it was in a low, controlled tone.

“What do they have?”

If there was any doubt in either of their minds that their client was involved, that doubt was wiped away by his question. Jill answered, “We don’t know yet. Phil Butterrick, from our office, is here and waiting to speak with Assistant Director Jackson. She may be more forthcoming.”

Handleman glanced over to share a meaningful look with Davis, who asked Stavros, “Is there anything you’d like to tell us?”

Bean had dealt with Stavros often enough to expect an emotional response, an outburst, a tirade, a string of insulting comments. Instead, he watched as his client dropped his face into his cupped hands and muttered, “He set me up.”

א

Margo Jackson had ensconced herself within William Stavros’ massive chair, staring at the array of flat-panel screens. Two computer technicians from Fort Detrick were methodically working on Stavros’ personal PC as well as his networked unit. Placing herself in his location of power, she felt his intensity, his drive, his obsession with changing the world. Most people, she reflected, attempted to avoid bad news or, at the very least, minimize its impact upon their lives. Stavros seemed to want to immerse himself in every detail of it.

He had been sitting in this chair, Margo recalled, when she had entered with the search warrant and had him escorted, ranting, out of the office. Other than allowing the techs to dig into his hard drives, she had decided to

let everything remain as he had left it, in order to soak up the ambiance of his environment before they began to disassemble it. Margo wanted to gain a feel for the suspect, to attempt to place herself inside his mind. She found the constant murmur of the multiple screens distracting and irritating, and wondered whether William Stavros would have been a different person without the constant bombardment,

Nicholas Reynolds, who was overseeing the related search at the Stavros residence, described to Margo a nearly identical setup there. Stavros had a wall of monitors in his library – where his staff told Reynolds Mr. Stavros spent almost all of his waking time – as well as a duplicate of the media center on a wall of his bedroom. The entire picture created was one of fanaticism. Margo did not need Craig McWilliams' skills as a profiler to get a handle on William Stavros. He was clearly a control freak with a god complex. She wondered if he ever had a moment of happiness, pleasure, or satisfaction, or if the stream of input he had created for himself was designed to ensure that it never occurred.

Directing her question to the technicians, she asked, "Anything yet?"

One of the two, without raising his eyes from the monitor, answered, "Maybe. Take a look." He turned the flat panel around to its normal position so it faced Margo. On it, she saw a list of notable names, each with a string of numbers to the right.

"Is it his phone list?"

The tech shook his head. "I thought so, too. They look like phone numbers. But I noticed in other files, where the numbers are obviously financial, that's the way he typed in dollar amounts. No dollar signs, no commas."

She looked back at the list, mentally adding in the commas. "Wow. We're in the millions with these folks. Are they donations from them?"

"Nope," answered the tech. "I've accessed his bank records. There are corresponding withdrawals for those amounts, not deposits."

"Withdrawals, as in cash?"

"You got it."

"Then they're payoffs?"

"Well, since almost everyone on the list is a politician, and looking at the dates, which precede election dates, my guess would be…."

"Campaign donations." Margo whistled appreciatively. "I think these amounts might exceed federal campaign finance limits."

The technician chuckled. "You think so?"

Margo continued reading through the list, when the second tech, who was plumbing the contents of Stavros' personal PC, said, "Bingo!"

He immediately rotated his panel around to Margo. She quickly skimmed the long e-mail which detailed the Times Square attack, listing the names of the attackers, the ordnance used, the addresses of the buildings where the attackers would hide, and the exact time. Margo did not recognize the name of the recipient, but the sender was Stavros. She flopped back in the chair, absorbing what she had read, asking the technician, "Have you found anything between Stavros and Kaval?"

"Not yet," he answered.

Margo twisted the monitor back around for the tech and said, "Print this for me and keep looking. I want Kaval. One more thing, look for a trojan, spyware, some remote-administrator bug."

"Will do," he replied, mouse-clicking on the printer icon. The laser printer instantly began feeding out the e-mail which Margo grabbed as she walked out of the room.

Threading her way through the turmoil of a full-blown major search, Margo walked toward the small office where they were keeping Stavros, when she was stopped by a thirty-ish man wearing an expensive suit. "Excuse me, Director Jackson?"

"It's just Assistant Director Jackson – Bill Burke is the Director – and I'm busy right now," she responded brusquely, continuing to walk.

Falling in step alongside her, he said, "I know you're busy, Assistant Director Jackson. I'm Phil Butterrick, one of Mr. Stavros' attorneys."

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Butterrick. He's going to need all the help he can get."

"Then you've found something?"

Margo stopped abruptly, turning to face the lawyer. "Mr. Butterrick, you know the drill. We have a bona fide search warrant, already reviewed by

your associates. It allows us unrestricted access to the home, offices, automobiles, and other properties of Mr. Stavros. Whatever we find will be turned over to the Attorney General's office, which will allow your office access to the materials during the discovery and disclosure process. As counsel to the suspect, you are allowed to observe our search to ensure that we do not exceed the boundaries prescribed in the warrant. In the meantime, you need to stay out of our way. Otherwise, your actions can be construed as interfering with the investigation. As I am sure you know, that is a federal offense."

She turned away from him without waiting for a response and continued walking down the long hallway. Reaching the office, she twisted the knob and entered without knocking. Accompanying Stavros were two others who, Margo guessed, were also his attorneys, each standing at a separate corner of the office, each speaking quietly into a cell phone. As they saw her enter, both snapped their phones closed without saying good-bye. She strode directly to the small desk where Stavros sat and, without a word, slapped the printout of the e-mail in front of him.

The female attorney reached for the paper, but Stavros slapped her hand away, picking it up himself, and began reading. Almost instantly his eyes widened and Margo noticed a vein on his temple visibly start to throb. He said nothing as he read. When finished, Stavros handed the paper to the woman who had been reading it over his shoulder. She was about to speak, when Margo cut her off. "Mr. Stavros, you're not really this stupid, are you?"

He abruptly raised his eyes to look at Jackson. "What do you mean?" he answered.

"Mr. Stavros, I must ask you not to…," his attorney cautioned.

"Shut up!" barked Stavros at the woman. He turned back to Margo. "Why do you ask that?"

Margo sat on the front edge of the desk, turned so she was facing him. "You're too anal. You're too organized. You're too damn smart to leave an e-mail like this on your computer. We didn't have to reconstruct it from a deleted condition. It wasn't even encrypted. It was in your sent folder!"

William Stavros turned to the two lawyers and said, "Leave us."

The black man spoke up, “Mr. Stavros, I don’t think you should….”

“NOW!”

The lawyer snapped his mouth closed and turned to leave, followed by the woman. When the door closed behind them, Stavros looked up at Margo and, speaking in a soft and even voice, said, “I’ve never seen this e-mail before in my life.”

“I’m not saying I completely believe you at this point, and we’ve found enough campaign financing improprieties to make your life, and the lives of lots of politicians, miserable for years to come. But that isn’t important right now. I need to know who would do *this* to you?”

“There’s only one person who would.”

“Who?”

“Suri Kaval.”

He was watching her face, expecting some reaction and seeing none. “You’re not surprised?”

“Hardly. It was an e-mail handed over to us by his receptionist which led us to you in the first place.”

“That bastard! He’s framing me.”

“Look, Stavros, you’re not lily white. You’ve pulled some shenanigans, and you’re certainly not the most pleasant person in the world, but my instincts are telling me the same thing. Unfortunately, my instincts aren’t going to get you out from under this. I need your help, and I need it fast.”

Stavros only considered her words for a moment before saying, “With pleasure. What do you want?”

Margo started to answer, when her cell phone vibrated. Unclipping it from her belt, she glanced at the screen to see Reese Johnson’s name on her caller ID. Punching the green button, she just said, “Not now,” into the phone.

Before she could switch it off, she heard Johnson say, “Margo. It’s important. I’m with Elohim, and He just told me that something big is about to happen.”

Standing up, she told Stavros, “I’ll be right back.” He nodded, and she exited to the hallway. From there she found another empty office. “Okay, Reese. What is it? What’s going to happen?”

“He won’t say. All he told me was that the Times Square attack was just a prelude to whatever this is. Apparently it’s going down soon.”

Margo stood silently, the phone pressed against the side of her face, and stared at the blank wall. Finally, she responded, “I might have a way to find out. Thanks, Reese. I’ll get back to you. Keep talking to Elohim. Maybe He’ll tell you something.”

“I’ll try.”

Ending the connection, she re-clipped the phone to her belt and returned to Stavros, who had swiveled around in his chair and was staring out the window. “Mr. Stavros?”

He spun around to face her, saying, “I have a feeling we’ll be spending some time together; please call me Bill.”

“Okay, Bill. We’ve got a problem.”

He could see the look of tense determination on her face and asked, “Is it our friend Mr. Kaval?”

“I don’t know yet. But that would sure as hell be my guess. It appears something else is about to happen, something that makes the Times Square thing look like small potatoes. I’m thinking you know something about it, even if you don’t think you do.”

א

The two men worked without speaking. After the doors to the U-Haul were tightly closed and padlocked, they climbed into the cab of the truck and started the engine, driving slowly, yet not too slowly, out of the parking lot. The dangerous part of this assignment had passed. The likelihood of arousing suspicion had been at its highest during the transfer of their cargo from the container into the truck. From this point on, they would appear to be just like any of the countless others in Los Angeles, moving into or out of an apartment.

As the driver carefully maneuvered the rental truck through Long Beach, heading east, the passenger pulled one of the cell phones out of the deep pocket of his dark green coveralls, snapped in a charged battery, and punched in a memorized number. After one ring, a voice answered, “Hello.”

“Hi, Dad,” he said. “We’ve just left. We’re finally on the road.”

With a surprisingly sincere tone, the other voice answered, “Great. I’m looking forward to seeing you and the kids.”

“Is everyone else on the way?”

“Yes, they all are. It should be a wonderful surprise for your mother.”

“Okay. I’m about to drive into a tunnel, and I’m going to lose you. Love you. See you soon.”

“Love you, son.”

At both ends of the terminated conversation, the men pulled the batteries out of the phones. One of them dropped the dead phone into a large bowl of water; the other, the man in the U-Haul, popped open the lid on a Big Gulp and slipped the cell phone into sixty-four ounces of Dr. Pepper.

The passenger turned to the driver and said, “Everyone’s en route.”

The driver just nodded as he accelerated the truck up an on-ramp, merging with the heavy traffic on the Harbor Freeway.

א

Ricki Darling stood behind the operators, watching them scrutinizing their terminal monitors. One of them pressed the eject button on his CD tray, lifting a disc out and offering it to her. “This one sounds like the last,” he said as she took the disc.

Adding it to the stack of others, she left the room. They did not need to be told to continue monitoring the list of phone numbers. The walk from her area to the Director’s office was a brief one normally, shortened even further by her hurried pace. As usual, Bill Burke’s door was open, and she went straight in, dropping the discs on his desk.

“I think we have the full first round,” she said, as Burke lifted the top CD and slid it into his waiting drive. They both listened to all seven conversations in order, neither saying anything until they reached the last, hearing the “dad” say he had heard from all of the others, and they were already on the road.

“Do we have locations?”

“Because the calls are so brief, we only get a rough fix, the cell they are in, maybe an adjacent one. The last one was Long Beach. The others are Seattle, Phoenix, Chicago, Miami, Atlanta, and San Francisco. Dad is here, in D.C.”

“There are no clues in any of the conversations?”

“None that I notice. The computer gang is tearing them all apart for some significant background sound which might give us a hint.”

Bill leaned back in his chair, trying to relax his tightening muscles. “Thank God Margo got the list of prepaid cell phones Stavros bought for this guy. Otherwise, we wouldn’t even have this much.”

“Burke, we really don’t have shit. All we know is that something is happening in seven major US cities. We don’t know what the plot is. We don’t know when it’s happening.”

“I think we know it’s soon.”

“That we do.”

The phone on Bill Burke’s desk chirped. He glanced at it and said, “It’s Margo,” punching the button on his direct line, and putting her on the speaker. “What do you have?”

Margo Jackson sounded excited. “Bill, I think we might have something helpful. I don’t know if Kaval was using Stavros out of convenience or just wanted to set him up for whatever is going down today, but he had Stavros’ people book the U-Haul trucks. They were all prepaid, and we have the list of locations as well as the names of the people who were going to pick them up.”

Burke sighed. “Margo, we already have seven locations from the cell companies. I’m sure the names are all bogus. I guess we could send agents to the rental locations, hoping to put together an ID or something, but we don’t have that much….”

“Bill,” Margo interrupted. “You’re forgetting something. After Oklahoma City….”

Ricki Darling interrupted Margo, “GPS!”

Margo went on, “Right. Most of the rental companies now use GPS transmitters in their rentals. If these guys are smart enough, they might have found them and disabled them, but it’s worth a shot.”

Ricki nodded. “I doubt they disabled them. That would immediately set off an alarm at the rental company. They would get suspicious, probably call the police immediately. Besides, they don’t think we’re on to them.”

Burke, getting excited also, slapped his hand on the desk. “Ricki, get back to your people and get them started on this.”

“I’ve already sent the rental information to your e-mail, Ricki.”

Darling was already up from the chair and nearly dashed out of the Director’s office.

Burke picked up the phone. “Good work, Margo.”

“Thanks.”

“I thought you were going out on a limb giving Stavros the benefit of the doubt, but it looks as if you might have been right.”

“I don’t know if he’s clean or dirty. And, at this point, I don’t care. I just had the feeling that we were running out of time and needed somebody who could tell us something. We don’t have weeks or months to figure it out.”

“It was a good gut-call.”

“Well, the call I got from Reese, with the warning from Elohim, really clinched it.”

Pausing for a moment, Burke said, “I just hope we’re in time.”

“I don’t want to think about that.”

Margo broke the connection and turned to re-enter the small office where Stavros still waited, when she saw one of the computer technicians trotting toward her.

“I found something.”

“What?”

“On Stavros’ personal PC…it’s a variation on the commercial program which allows you to have access to your computer from anywhere. Except it works totally in the background.”

“Just tell me what it did.”

“It’s responsible for the e-mails we found. They were planted.”

“Can you find its source?”

With a grin, he answered, “Already did,” handing Margo a sheet of paper.

She looked at the sheet, smiled, and started to reach for her cell phone again, when the technician said, “There’s something else.” He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a CD stored in an evidence bag. “This was on his desk in a storage case. You might want to listen to it soon.”

א

Preston Bennett, called for an urgent meeting by Clayton Dean, entered his boss’s office to find Margo Jackson and Bill Burke standing next to Dean’s desk. Dean looked up. “Preston, come in.” His voice sounded subdued and sad.

“What’s up, Clay? Margo? Bill?” He could not help but notice the somber expressions on all three of their faces.

Bill Burke said, “Preston, please have a seat.”

“Something wrong?” Bennett asked as he sat in one of the visitors’ chairs.

Instead of replying, Clayton clicked his mouse a single time. From the computer’s speakers, Bennett heard his own voice saying, *“I just can’t believe Kaval would be behind this.”*

It was followed by Dean. *“Believe it. We don’t have the smoking gun, but pretty damn close.”*

Then came Bennett asking, *“What do you want me to do?”*

Dean clicked the mouse again, stopping the playback. All three stared at Preston silently. His mind whirled, trying to absorb the reality of the recording, desperately searching for an explanation, before he finally said, “I…how…where did you get this?”

Margo hitched one leg up onto the corner of the desk in front of Bennett and said, “We found it on the desk of William Stavros.”

“He’s been bugging my home?”

Clayton answered, “Preston, it’s impossible to bug your house, you know that. Look, not only has Margo talked to Stavros, who told her everything, but we’ve also found fingerprints on the disc.”

Preston continued to struggle with the facts presented to him. Clayton and the others were all looking at him so accusatorily that there must be

only one explanation. “Mine? You found my fingerprints? Clay, that can’t be! I would never….”

“They were Debbie’s.” Dean’s response was delivered flatly, carrying no inflection at all.

The words cut through Bennett’s confusion instantly, triggering a natural reaction to defend his wife. “That’s bullshit! This is a setup. Her fingerprints mean nothing. Someone could have used a disc she handled.”

Margo spoke again. “Preston, after we got this, we obtained a search warrant and found the recording gear in your house. Because of the anti-bugging systems in place, the only thing which would work was a local machine which burned a CD. The CD had to be hand-carried out of the house; any wireless transmission would be blocked, detected, or intercepted.”

“You searched my house? Without even telling me?”

Clayton answered, “Preston, knock it off. This isn’t some stupid corporate wiretapping thing; we’re talking about national security. Of course we did it without your knowledge. The recording gear was built into Debbie’s closet behind a false wall. The small CPU operating the machine was programmed to call Debbie’s cell phone whenever there was a new recording to be delivered. Her fingerprints were on the CD. Stavros told us she was his mole. And our search at his offices have turned up numerous visits from her on his building security surveillance tapes, including a visit the day of this conversation. After Stavros listened to the disc, he called Kaval who left the country that night.”

Clayton stared at his old friend, watching as the details of the damning evidence sunk in. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that Preston was not in collusion with his wife, although he was certain Margo and Bill would want a little more talk time with Bennett to satisfy themselves.

Finding his voice, Bennett asked, “Where is she? Can I see her?”

Margo replied, “We’re picking her up now. We’re bringing her in for questioning. Preston, I’m afraid we can’t let you talk to her for a while.”

“Why?” Bennett’s normally controlled voice sounded weak and pathetic.

“We need to question her first. We also need to spend a little more time….”

Clayton interrupted Margo who was obviously uncomfortable. In a gentle voice, he said, “Preston, the FBI still needs to rule you out as a conspirator on this.”

Rather than becoming upset at the accusation, Bennett simply nodded weakly. “I understand. Am I under arrest?”

Burke answered quickly, “No, you’re not. There isn’t any evidence in our possession indicating any knowledge or participation on your part. It’s just normal protocol to check out and eliminate everyone close to a known….”

“Traitor,” Bennett said the word for him. Tears began to well in his eyes.

א

“It was late afternoon, the day that Elohim made His announcement about the marks on peoples’ palms,” Turbo said, staring directly into the camera lens. “Nobody else was here. It was a real quiet day. This guy walked in and said he needed a tattoo. I told him nobody needed a tattoo; he just wanted one. It’s kind of my stock line that I say to people. Anyway, I asked him where he wanted it, on what part of his body. He said he wanted it on his palm.”

Kiefe Wilson, the network reporter, stopped him to ask a question. “At that time did you know who he was?”

“Yeah, I did. He had a floppy hat on and sunglasses, but I recognized him. My woman watches his show all of the time, buys his tapes and books, too. So his face is all over our apartment. She’s always using his book title on me, you know, *Be-A-Man* – Beaman. I told her he changed his name to Beaman just to be able to say that. So, yeah, I knew it was Dick Beaman.”

“So what happened next?”

“I told him I don’t do palms. The tats don’t stay, and they look like sh… crap. He told me he’d been to other shops, I don’t remember how many he said, and the last shop sent him to me, said I was the best.” A smile of pride

crept onto Turbo's face as he made the last comment. "Then he peeled off nine $100 bills and dropped 'em on the counter. So I did it."

"Did what, exactly?"

"I put that mark, the Elohim mark, on Beaman's right hand."

"Where did you get it, the original to work from, so quickly?"

"Are you kidding? Within minutes of that Elohim's announcement, it was on TV. Within an hour it was all over the Internet. I watched the speech. The minute I heard Him say people going to Heaven would have a mark, I knew I could start selling some. It's what I do. I figured I'd have to be ready. It was a bummer when He said it would be on people's palms. Anyway, you know, I got a j-peg of it from the 'net."

Turbo reached around behind himself and picked up an inkjet printout of the mark, handing the sheet to the reporter who held it up for the cameraman to zoom in on it. Then the reporter asked, "Did you see the show where Beaman was attacked by his audience?"

"I did. Ever since he was in here, I've been watching for him to appear. I kind of figured what he was up to."

"Did you see the mark that he showed?"

"The devil mark, yeah!"

"Do you have any idea how that could have happened?"

"You mean other than Beaman pissed off God, and God switched it – no, I don't. There's no way what I did could have changed to that."

"And you're certain of all of this? That it actually was Dick Beaman, and all of the other details?"

Offended, Turbo's voice took on an edge as he answered, "Look…I'm not a stoner and I don't drink. It makes my hands shake, screws up my business. Yeah, I'm sure. Besides, I got the tape. And I take a picture of all my work, so I have one of his tat."

"Could I see the picture?"

"Sure."

Turbo reached around to the counter again and retrieved another print, handing it to the reporter, who said to the camera, "This is a print of the picture Turbo took of his finished work on Dick Beaman." He held it

steadily for the cameraman who again zoomed in. It was a clear shot of a right hand, fully open, with Elohim's mark on the palm.

"Turbo, one more question. Why did you come forward about this? Violating the privacy of your customers on national television can't be good for business."

"I didn't want people to get the wrong idea about this Elohim. People were believing Beaman had the real thing on his palm and God took it away. That wasn't right, and I was the only one who knew."

"Turbo, thank you again. Kathy?"

The view returned to the studio where Kathy Crocker was smiling at the camera. "Thank you, Kiefe. As you heard, Turbo mentioned a tape. We have a copy of the surveillance tape from the tattoo shop, taken the night Dick Beaman came in."

Crocker's face was replaced by a black and white view of the same shop where the interview had just occurred. The front door opened, and a man walked in wearing the hat and glasses Turbo had described. There was no sound with the recording.

Kathy narrated. "This is the front lobby view. You can see the customer come in. You can also see Turbo sitting at the counter. From this view, the customer is obviously not recognizable. You can see the exchange of money and the two of them going into the back room, the shop where Turbo does his actual work. The view changes now to another camera in the back, and you can see the customer sit down and Turbo start to work. We're going to skip forward now to the end of the tape."

The tape fast-forwarded through the tattooing process, creating an unintentionally comical image of Turbo working at nine times his normal speed. As this played, Crocker said, "I can't resist making one comment – now I can see why he calls himself 'Turbo.' Okay, we're back to normal speed now. Turbo is finished and leaves the room for a moment. Thinking he has privacy, the customer takes off his sunglasses, probably for a better look at the tattoo."

The image froze as the customer removed his sunglasses. The video tech zoomed in on the face.

“As you can see, the tape shows it was Dick Beaman at the tattoo parlor that evening.”

Crocker’s face returned to the screen as she said, “Barry, quite a dramatic turn of events. We’ve gone from believing Beaman had a bona fide mark and was punished by God for refusing to go to Heaven, to discovering he forged the mark and was planning on capitalizing on it by pretending to stay. Either way, it looks as though Elohim was behind the final event which resulted in Beaman’s death.”

Barry Thorndike stared at his desk mate for a moment before speaking. “Kathy, I’m not quite sure how to respond. Suffice it to say, you are obviously much more comfortable passing judgment on Elohim than am I.”

Crocker’s smile tightened as Thorndike spoke. Through nearly clenched teeth, she said, “I guess I should be worrying about being struck by lightning?”

Trying his best to make it seem as if they were engaging in friendly banter, Barry replied, “Kathy, if He were that kind of God, the lightning would have struck you years ago.”

א

Kirk Strickland stared through the view slot in the unmarked van, watching the U-Haul which was parked in one of the long-term lots at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix. To Strickland, there did not appear to be anyone with the truck. Turning away from the slot, he said to Benny Watkins, his second-in-command, “I think we need to make our move.”

Watkins agreed, “Considering we don’t have any idea what their timing is, I agree. How did we get so lucky to be the lead team?”

Grabbing the first protective suit from the rack and struggling to put it on, Kirk answered, “Hmm…’cause we’re the best?”

“Either that, or we’re the team they don’t care about losing.” Watkins also began the laborious process of donning his gear. “What do you think we’ve got in there, Kirk?”

“Well,” Strickland answered, grunting from the effort of pulling on the head shield, “you know what I found with the sniffer.”

“Yeah, another Oklahoma City. Fertilizer and diesel fuel.”

“That, plus the radioactive stuff,” Strickland added, referring to the Geiger counter reading he also took during his surreptitious walk around the U-Haul.

“Don’t remind me. I’m talking about the fuse. What do you think we’ve got?”

“We know it’s not a mechanical timer; the microphone would’ve picked up the ticking. Either it’s an electronic timer or it’s remote-controlled.”

“My guess, it’s tied to a cell phone.”

“You might be right. I hope so. We’ll kill the RF when we blanket it. We just need to get the blanket on it quickly enough in case they’re watching from a distance.”

Watkins looked suddenly worried.

Strickland noticed and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I know we’re doing this one first to figure it out and find any booby traps before the teams move on the other six. But what if they *are* watching? We throw the blanket over this one and they can’t send their signal. But they sure as hell can blow the other six. At that point they’ll figure out they’ve been made.”

Strickland stopped fighting his suit for a moment. “You know, you’re right. Shit.” He keyed his microphone. “This is Eagle One. I need the ‘ops’ director.”

After a brief pause, a voice answered, “Ops.”

Strickland explained his partner’s concern to the man in charge of all the teams. When he finished, the voice said, “Stand by.”

א

“This is nail-biting time,” said Bill Burke, sitting next to Margo Jackson in the Command and Control Center of the Department of Homeland Security.

“I hate this,” she answered in a soft voice. Her eyes moved from one large flat-screen panel to another, each showing a long-range view of one of the seven U-Haul trucks. All seven looked abandoned. In addition to the truck parked at Sky Harbor in Phoenix, she saw one at a shopping mall in

Seattle, another in the parking lot near Union Station in Chicago, a fourth in a parking lot in downtown Atlanta, the fifth in the midst of a crowded lot outside a baseball stadium in Miami, the sixth in the center of downtown Los Angeles, and the seventh on the top deck of a seven-story parking structure in San Francisco.

Thomas Eades, the Secretary of Homeland Security, was standing about ten feet in front of them, talking on the telephone. He turned and motioned for them to come over. When they joined him, he put on the speaker phone, saying, "You're on speaker. Bill Burke and Margo Jackson with the FBI are with me. Please recap what you just said for them." To them, Eades said, "This is Marlin James, the operations officer in charge of the bomb squads. Go ahead, Marlin."

"As you may know, it's standard procedure with multiple bombs to disable one first. If there are any surprises, we can learn from our mistakes on the first one before we touch the others. Some of the bad guys are now using cell phones to detonate their bombs. We can stop the signal from entering a truck with a shielded blanket which we throw over the bomb. It stops the cell signal. We do it first on all ops. Our team in Phoenix was designated as lead team for this op. They just asked a good question. If the bad guys are watching, we can throw the blanket over the truck quickly enough to be okay on that specific one, but when they see us do it, they'll figure out that we've made them. They might just detonate the other six while we're trying to disarm the first."

Eades said, "Good point, Marlin. What do you suggest?"

"Well, it's really the lesser of two evils, I guess. We can proceed as planned and hope they aren't watching, gaining the benefit of figuring one out first before we tackle the other six. Or, we can coordinate throwing the shield blanket on all seven simultaneously and proceed with simultaneous disarming procedures, in which case we lose the benefit of learning from the first one."

Eades turned and looked at Burke and Jackson. "What are your thoughts?"

Margo spoke first, asking, "What's the downside of blanketing all seven at once, but still doing the Phoenix disarming first?"

Marlin's voice came over the speaker. "Not a bad idea, actually. Should have thought of it myself."

Eades looked at Burke, who nodded his agreement, and said, "Marlin, that's the direction we take. Blanket all of them and disarm Phoenix first."

"Roger that." The phone line went dead.

א

Strickland told Watkins, "We've got our answer. Call in the truck with the blanket, but tell them to hold until the others are in place."

Watkins spoke into his radio and instructed the team driving the blanket truck to move in and hold. They watched the plain, white truck through their view slots as it slowly drove down the parking lane. Fortunately, there was an empty space across from the U-Haul. They pulled into the space, with the truck positioned so the roll-up door at the rear was facing it. Shutting off the engine, they waited for word.

At each of the other locations, identical trucks maneuvered as close as possible to their targets. The team in Miami, encountering a completely full lot, had no choice but to leave their truck idling in the driving lane behind the U-Haul. They radioed their status to the ops director who, realizing the tenuousness of their situation, put out the word for all teams to get ready quickly.

Synchronized perfectly, the driver-side and passenger-side doors of all seven trucks opened, the two men in each cab getting out of their truck and walking to the rear door. With the flipping of the latches, seven doors in seven states rolled up nearly in unison. The additional team members scrambled out, pulling the silver-colored blankets with them onto the pavement.

א

A lone man, watching through binoculars from the top of a nearby building in Atlanta, saw the men rapidly unfolding the silver blanket and running toward the U-Haul. Letting the binoculars drop on their strap

against his chest, he punched the speed-dial number, listening anxiously for the connection to be made. With his other hand, he hit the speed-dial number for his boss on a second phone. Finally, he heard the click, indicating the connection was about to be made to the detonator cell phone, and then heard the ring tone produced by the carrier. Not seeing an explosion from the parking lot below, he dropped the first cell phone and lifted the binoculars back to his eyes in time to see the U-Haul completely engulfed by the silver blanket. Cursing his own slowness, he heard a voice answer on his other phone. Without hesitation, he shouted, “BLOW UP THE OTHERS!”

א

The Miami team, blocking the aisle, was also scrambling to unfurl the blanket. Shouting at each other, they began twisting it around so they could pull it over the target, when a pickup truck, driving too fast for a parking lot, suddenly came down the lane. The driver slammed on his brakes and stopped without hitting any of the team. Still trying desperately to complete their assignment, they ignored the pickup and started to pull the blanket up, only to find it was trapped under the front wheel of the truck. Shouting and motioning, they beseeched the driver to back up. He slipped the gearshift into reverse. Just as the truck wheel rolled clear of the blanket, the team member closest to the U-Haul barely heard a partial ring tone from inside.

א

Thomas Eades, Margo Jackson, Bill Burke, and the others were watching the Miami feed. None of them released a breath as they saw the sudden appearance of the pickup truck, saw the team struggle with the blanket, and saw the bright, white flash a moment before the video camera ceased its broadcast.

“Oh, my God,” whispered Margo, as Eades reached for the telephone to call the President.

Bill Burke, in a soft voice, said, “We’re not out of the woods yet,” pointing to the feed from Phoenix as Strickland and Watkins crawled under

the edge of the blanket with their tools.

א

They had decided beforehand not to attempt to open the rear doors since they would be the most likely to have a tamper switch affixed. Instead, using electric shears, they cut a small hole in the metal side of the storage bay. The RF blanket not only prevented any radio signals from entering, it also blocked out nearly all light, so they worked with a hand-held spotlight and a halogen lamp on a portable tripod.

Finishing the opening, Strickland fed a low-light camera with a tip-mounted light into the opening. He was able to crudely direct it by manipulating the stiff cable attached. Staring at the video screen, he said to Watkins, “It looks pretty straightforward. The fertilizer is all up against the front. The trigger is in plain view. Nothing fancy.” Twisting the cable around for a different view, he continued, “I don’t see anything at the rear doors or fastened to any of the walls.” He paused again as he further manhandled the cable, trying to see as much as possible. “My best view is of the opposite wall, Benny. Go around and cut through over there…on the other side. I’ll watch you come through.”

Watkins took the electric shears and circled the truck, pushing the blanket away from the sides as he walked, being careful not to allow it to lift in any area. Strickland could see the tip of the shears penetrate and easily cut through the thin metal. Within two minutes, Watkins had cut a hole large enough to enter. Over his earbud, Strickland heard Watkins say, “Going in.”

“Go ahead. It looks clear.”

As Benny climbed into the storage area, Strickland slid a shielded coaxial cable under the blanket, instructing a team member on the outside to hook the coax to their transmitter. ‘No point in doing our work first,’ Strickland thought, ‘if no one is going to learn from it.’ Within moments, the mobile command posts at the other locations were watching Watkins progress as he positioned the camera for a better view. The live video and audio feed was also transmitted to the room where Jackson, Burke, and

Eades observed. Bill Burke watched entranced, amazed by how calm Watkins appeared.

“This is about as simple as it gets,” Benny said as Strickland joined him inside the truck. “Basic flash-fire detonator, two wires between it and the cell phone, no dummies. What do you think, Kirk?”

Strickland shined his bright spotlight on the detonator, leaning forward to peer at it closely, said, “Cut ’em.”

All of the people, watching the audio/video feed at several locations, again held their breath as Watkins removed two nippers from his pouch, positioning one on each wire. “One…two…THREE!”

He simultaneously snipped both wires. Nothing happened. Setting down the nippers, Watkins carefully lifted the detonator from its nest and, turning, handed it to Strickland who gently walked it to the cut opening in the wall of the truck. He then set it down on the truck bed and climbed back out, reaching back in to retrieve it. Carefully, he placed it inside the blast box which he then slid under the edge of the blanket to a waiting team member outside.

As Strickland had removed the detonator from the proximity of the bomb, Watkins took care of the loose ends, removing the cell phone component of the detonator and slowly examining the balance of the fertilizer, using a sensitive metal detector, for evidence of any other detonation methods. Keying his microphone, he said, “Kirk, we need to sift through this stuff just to be sure.”

Strickland, who was standing back at the hole in the wall, answered, “Not us, man. Remember, this stuff is hotter than hell. Let’s let the guys with the radiation suits take over. We need to get our butts into decontamination right now.”

א

“The immediate casualties we are aware of in Miami were the bomb team and the as yet unidentified driver of the pickup truck. The U-Haul was filled with fertilizer and diesel fuel just like the Oklahoma City bomb, but radioactive pellets were added to the mixture, making it a radiological

dispersal device, or ‘dirty bomb.’ The radioactive material, caesium-137, was immediately disseminated by the explosion over a three-mile radius which included a full sports stadium, occupied by nearly 40,000 people. Homeland Security and FEMA have quarantined the area, as outlined on the map we have provided to you, and established care and decontamination facilities at several points around the perimeter.”

Thomas Eades paused for a moment, looking around at the faces of the reporters assembled for the press conference, trying to gauge their reactions before continuing. “I’d like to take a moment to remind everyone that an RDD is not a weapon of mass destruction. It is commonly referred to as a ‘weapon of mass disruption’ because of the psychological effect it has on people. Although there were many people contaminated by the radioactive fallout from this device, the established expectancy of death as a result of this exposure is minimal. Our decontamination teams will provide all of the citizens affected by this fallout with safe and clean temporary shelters, not allowing them to further expose themselves by breathing in the material. They will each receive a thorough scrubbing and decontamination. Their clothing and personal effects will be safely secured. And they will be escorted to their homes. Hospitalization will not be required except for those directly injured by the blast. All of those contaminated will receive checkups and follow-up visits for as long as needed.

“The blast radius will be another matter. All of the automobiles, buildings, trees, concrete, pavement, and even the soil will require decontamination prior to the resumption of public access. This process will take several months.

“I would like to reiterate the importance of providing accurate information to the public on this matter. A so-called dirty bomb is used by terrorists because the material is relatively easy to obtain on the black market and, also, because they believe the psychological and emotional impact will exceed the reality of the blast itself. It is important for all of us not to pander to or contribute to any sort of hysteria. Any questions?”

“Has anyone claimed responsibility for this attack?”

“Claimed responsibility, no. However, the FBI believes that it has identified the person responsible.”

“Person? This was done by one person? Who?”

“It is up to the FBI to release that information when appropriate. This plot was obviously carried out by many people. When I said ‘person’ in the singular, I was referring to an individual who is believed to be responsible for planning it and setting it in motion. Another question, please?”

“Can we expect an arrest of the person responsible soon?”

“Again, I am going to ask that you wait until the FBI is prepared to make a statement regarding this aspect of the situation. Any questions regarding the bombing or the bombing attempts?”

“Were any of your teams contaminated in the process of disarming the bombs?”

“Essentially, no. We minimized the amount of time they were each exposed, and they utilized modified bomb suits which contained some shielding. We also had decontamination units standing by for immediate use. They all wore exposure badges similar to those used on nuclear submarines or by the personnel working within nuclear power plants, and none of their badges indicated an exposure exceeding safe limits. Thank you for asking that question, by the way. Another question?”

א

Suri Kaval pressed the mute button on his remote, leaving the video of Thomas Eades on the screen, and turned to answer his private line.

“Kaval.”

“Not exactly a successful plot, Suri,” a voice said.

Kaval’s stomach muscles tightened at the words and tone of disapproval. “I never imagined….”

“WHAT?” the man shouted. “You never imagined that they were smart enough to figure out your plan? Do you have any idea how many battles in your history have been lost because the opposition was underestimated?”

“It won’t happen again.”

“No,” said the other, a mysterious calmness in his voice replacing the previous fury. “You are correct. It will not.”

א

Reese switched off the television. “It could have been a lot worse, I guess,” he said to Elohim.

“Yes. It could have,” Elohim responded, his voice neutral.

Reese tried to read Elohim’s face. “It isn’t over, is it?”

Frowning, Elohim answered, “Omniscience is not a prerequisite to know the answer to that question.”

א

Craig McWilliams and Nicholas Reynolds waited for Margo Jackson in her office. They could hear her talking to her aide outside the room. Neither spoke as they waited. Less than a minute elapsed before she came in, flopping heavily into one of the visitors’ chairs with a loud sigh.

“Tired?” asked Reynolds.

“Exhausted is more like it. I thought Elohim said we’d have time to wrap up loose ends before we left. I wanted to spend the time with my family, but I’ve done nothing but run around for four days now.”

“Margo,” Craig asked, “if you don’t mind my asking, are you married?”

“Yeah, to this job.” She leaned her head back in the chair, sprawled her legs forward, and stared at the ceiling before she continued. “Dating another Marine was *verboten* in the Corps, you know that. It’s certainly frowned upon here at the Bureau to date a fellow agent, especially if you’re on any kind of a career track. So, most of my life I’ve been surrounded by attractive, exciting, intelligent men, none of whom I’ve been allowed to date.”

“What about college? There weren’t any rules against it there.”

She smiled. “Of course there were. They were just self-imposed. Look, I felt so damn lucky to be going to college, I wasn’t about to waste a minute of it. I watched a lot of the other kids pissing away their study time on dates, on the phone planning dates, getting ready for dates, sleeping late after dates, or endlessly discussing who was dating whom. That just wasn’t why I was there.”

“Well, maybe you’ll meet a nice guy in Heaven,” offered Reynolds.

Margo laughed. “That just sounds so weird. I’m still not used to the idea. I guess if I were going to meet a nice guy, Heaven would be the place. I’ll tell you both one thing – the first item on my agenda when I get there is a nice, long snooze.”

Chuckling, they enjoyed a brief release from the tension they had all been feeling. Reluctantly returning to the moment, McWilliams said, “Margo, that was a good call on Stavros. How did you figure out so quickly that he was being set up by Kaval?”

“You know,” she answered, still examining the acoustic tiles in the ceiling grid, “I don’t really know. Gut feeling, I guess. I was aware of how little time we have right now. It just felt right to make a snap judgment.”

“It was the right one. You saved a lot of people.”

“That’s for sure,” Reynolds added.

“Thanks.”

All fell silent, their minds attempting to dismiss the images of what could have been. The quiet was broken as Craig said, “Am I the only one who feels guilty?”

“About leaving tomorrow?” asked Nicholas.

“Yeah. About leaving.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Nope. Definitely not,” added Margo, sliding back in the chair and focusing on her friends.

Another silence. This time it was broken by Reynolds who spoke what all three were thinking. “Have you thought about staying?”

“I have,” Margo answered. “After all, I’ve been wanting Bill’s job and I hear it’s going to become open soon.”

They all laughed again, but only halfheartedly.

“Are you going to do it?”

“I don’t know, Nicholas. Probably not. It seems crazy to stay. What about you two?”

“I guess I’m going to go,” replied McWilliams. “If I stayed, Dorothy would stay. It wouldn’t be fair to her.”

“I’m in the same boat you are, Margo. Not married. No one really close. There are moments I feel bad about leaving. Then I think about what Elohim said, how bad it’s going to get soon, and I’m not sure I want to stick around for that, either.”

“Hey, there’s an idea,” McWilliams blurted out jovially. “Maybe we should fix up the two of you. You’re both single. I don’t think the age difference will matter up there.”

Smiling wickedly, Margo said, “I don’t know, Craig. I’m not much into white guys.”

Laughter again erupted, louder and more genuine than before, interrupted by the ringing of Margo’s cell phone. Motioning for quiet, Margo answered, “Jackson.”

“Margo, it’s Reese.”

“Hi, Reese. Nicholas and Craig are with me. Should I put you on speaker?”

“Probably a good idea,” Johnson answered, sounding somber.

Margo pressed the speaker button on her cell and held the phone down on her lap. “Go ahead.”

“I just stepped out from being with Elohim. This isn’t much help, but He’s telling me there’s more to come.”

“Oh, shit!” said McWilliams.

“Any hint at all, any details?” asked Margo.

“No. But I am getting the distinct impression that Kaval isn’t the whole story.”

“There’s someone else?”

“I’m reading between the lines. I could be wrong, but, yes, I think there’s another involved. And, one more thing…,” Reese paused.

Prompting him, Reynolds said, “Reese, what is it?”

“Well, let’s just say Elohim is describing the other person as His eternal enemy.”

Reynolds sagged back into his chair. “Oh, that’s just great.”

Reese sat at the table in Elohim's private quarters, typing his recollections of the past few days into his laptop. A part of his mind focused on the task, while the rest observed and attempted to analyze Elohim who sat on the couch, staring out the window. He was glad his memory was not the sole source of information for these notes, referring frequently to the typed transcripts of the meetings.

"I've been meaning to ask You…," Reese said, waiting for Elohim to acknowledge him before continuing.

Turning, Elohim asked, "What is that?"

"Why no recordings? Why did You disable the audio and video of the meetings?"

"There were many reasons, one being the effect the knowledge of being recorded would have on the various interviewers. Knowing that their words, voices, and demeanors would very likely be broadcast to a billion people would result in posturing rather than a free-flowing dialogue. Primarily, I felt it would have been contrary to the purpose of the interviews. It was your assigned task to evaluate and decide my identity. You were provided with full access, including your presence during nearly all of the discussions I had with others. Your government, your people awaited your evaluation. If the images and sounds of the meetings were to have been captured, do you believe they would not have been broadcast?"

"You're probably right. They would have been leaked or deliberately sent out. But why is that a bad thing?"

Elohim hitched one leg onto the cushion, turning to face Reese completely. "You are one of the most intelligent and intuitive people on Earth, yet you found reaching a determination daunting. Isn't that true?"

"It is."

"You have witnessed the process of public assimilation many times. Do you have great faith in the abilities of all or even most to come to the same conclusion as you?"

"So, You're saying the masses are not intelligent enough?"

"Actually, no. What I'm saying is…people need leaders. It may seem to be a tautology, but they need leaders because they need to be led. A

revealing event occurred many years ago, during your Viet Nam War. One morning a small group of soldiers were on patrol, walking a trail deep in the jungle, when they came upon the dead body of one of their enemy. The body was adjacent to the trail, propped against a tree, for all of them to file past. The sergeant, the leader of this small group, emptied the clip of his automatic weapon into the corpse. As each soldier walked past, he did the same, so that by the time the twelfth man passed, this dead body was torn to shreds. Many of the men in that patrol were revolted and sickened by their own actions; yet, when their turns came, they did as their leader and, of more significance, the others who came before had done.

"I say this is a revealing event because there was opportunity for several decisions to be made. The sergeant could have decided to send a dramatically different message to his men by stopping the patrol to bury the dead body. Alternately, one of the soldiers behind the sergeant could have decided not to follow his lead by not firing. This is important – important because it would have provided a different example for the others to follow, since the others obviously did not have the fortitude to break the chain on their own.

"There is no shortage of leaders in your society. Although your government has a single head, there are many within this country who do not view him as such. They follow other leaders from the opposition party, leaders who more closely mirror their own views. Many citizens prefer to be led by the news media, directly or indirectly. They believe that this group has their best interests at heart and, therefore, they are more inclined to follow its lead. Some people will choose, consciously or subconsciously, particular role models to follow. Once their role models embrace certain beliefs or positions, the people feel that they have permission to embrace those viewpoints, as well. Sadly, the chosen role models of many are the most shallow and self-absorbed within your culture. If you add parents, clergy, teachers, academic experts, and many others to this list of leaders, the issue becomes clear. Bear in mind we are only discussing this country. As we extend the analysis to the rest of the world, the list of influential leaders expands tremendously. All of them have their own agendas. They all

maintain their power, their leadership roles, by coloring, slanting, and controlling the messages to their own group of followers.

“You, Reese, became a leader of people at least for a short period of time. It was only you who had the access and the information. It was only you who could provide the authoritative position.”

Pointing to the pile of pages beside his laptop, Reese said, “There were transcripts. They were posted on the Internet pretty quickly.”

“Written transcripts do not have the same impact or influence upon the public as does the combination of video and audio. How many people on Earth, in your estimation, have read even a portion of the transcripts?”

“I would guess not very many.”

“Don’t you find that odd, considering the subject?”

“Odd, but not surprising, I guess.”

“You are right, of course. The people who have taken the time to read even a portion of the transcripts number in the thousands worldwide. And most who read them did so because they were aware that others were depending upon them for their opinions.”

“I’m not sure I understand the problem with the tapes being recorded and released. The audience for that would be in the millions.”

“Are you certain? Would they sit through the hours of discussions, or would they prefer an edited, condensed version with commentary and explanation from various experts? I suspect the presentation which would attract a truly huge audience would be fifty hours of raw recordings summarized in an hour, perhaps an hour and half. The audience for the unedited version would be the same people who have taken the time to read all of the transcripts. Reese, could all of the details needed to understand that which transpired in the interview room be condensed into an hour?”

“No. Not even close.”

“And if it were possible to edit all of our conversations down to an hour, do you believe the moments chosen by the various news producers for inclusion would be the same as your choices?”

“Also, no. I’ve been struggling to journalize my experiences from the past few days, and I can’t think of any parts which are not important, which

I would be comfortable editing out of the story. So, I suppose you're probably right. Tell me, is it simply laziness on the part of most?"

"Actually, no. We are brought back to the earlier point of people requiring a leader. They do not want to watch the raw recordings because it would force *them* to analyze, interpret, and decide what is right and what is real. Very few among you seek that responsibility. People are much more comfortable having their chosen leaders perform the analysis and do the interpretation, then make the decision for them. These leaders will announce what *they* perceive to be the truth. Unfortunately, they are spread across a broad spectrum of intelligence and intuitiveness, with none reaching the level of your abilities. They will also approach the task burdened by their own agendas, inevitably distorting the final result. As I said, it was necessary for you to become a temporary leader, if for no other reason than for there to be clarity."

Reese fell silent, contemplating Elohim's words for a time. Eventually, Elohim asked, "Why are you troubled?"

Slowly releasing a deep breath, Reese replied, "From Your descriptions, it just doesn't seem that we're much of a prize, the human race. Sometimes I wonder why You're interested in us. Other times I wonder, since You made us, why You didn't make us better. Even Your reason for not intervening to prevent a catastrophe is so that people will learn from it. Why didn't You just make us with that lesson already learned? In fact, why didn't You just make us all Heaven-ready and do away with this whole selection process?"

Elohim gazed at Reese for what felt like minutes, finally answering, "From the moment we met, I promised that I would not only be always truthful with you, but that I would also not mislead you. The truthful answer to your question is…I can't. Do not misunderstand, I am capable of making a race, as you put it, Heaven-ready. In fact, I have done exactly that in the past. My loyal and loving band of angels were the fruit of that effort. Yet, I discovered that despite their beauty, despite their love, despite their intelligence, all bestowed upon them by me, they were all incapable of ever once speaking a phrase, performing a deed, or even thinking a thought which was a surprise to me. Scientists on Earth have worked for years to

make a lifelike robot. It has been the subject of nearly countless books and movies. Should they ever succeed, they will discover, as I have, that they created nothing but a mirror image of themselves, an image with no real distinction. It will have no desires other than the desires programmed by its creators – no dreams, no hopes, no ambitions, and no failures, unless its creators made it so.

"Reese, imagine living in a world with no other humans, populated only with your creations."

"There are some who would find it pleasant," Reese replied.

"Only at first. Even the shallowest, most controlling, most hedonistic person would soon find the existence an empty one."

"The husbands in the story *The Stepford Wives* were happy with the arrangement."

"I doubt, in reality rather than fiction, they would be. Would you prefer an obedient robot over Claire? And even so, they continued to have interactions with others who were real. I am describing an environment where no real people, as you would define them, existed."

"I see Your point."

"So I was faced with a conundrum. How could I create a being who would be capable of surprising me, its creator? I discovered the answer within the nearly infinite variables inherent in evolution."

"How ironic. The staunchest believers in religion see evolution as anathema to their faith."

"You are right; it is ironic. I was only able to create humans, as you are today, by creating an environment within which you could thrive, and then placing the most basic of building blocks in proximity."

"DNA."

"Yes, DNA. As I told you in our earlier discussions, there were times I needed to step in, to make sure the stage was set for your arrival. Had I not, for example, to this day the world would be dominated by dinosaurs rather than humans. There were other times when I prevented major devastation which would have caused the extinction of your race. At such times, I hardly refused to intervene. Once the matrix of life was in place, I tinkered more than once, creating different lines, different breeds, and extinguishing

others, all the while maintaining the uniqueness and the wonderful independence of the system itself.

"There finally came a day, hundreds of thousands of your years ago, when I watched an erect hominid decide…DECIDE…to swim a river rather than climb a tree to escape a predator. Imagine my joy! I was certain he would climb into the tree as he and others of his kind had done predictably for many years. I was surprised. Truly and completely surprised. And it was the first of many to come. Again I intervened, this time on the micro level. That primitive man, who so delighted me that day, led a charmed life. He did not suffer a shortage of food or water. His shelter was excellent, a lovely cave from which I had rousted a family of tigers. And because his supply of food was good and the quality of his home was excellent, he had no trouble attracting a wide choice of mates. He chose wisely, and the pair produced many children, some of the offspring also possessing the trait. I ensured that those who carried the trait prospered."

"Eden?"

"Indeed. And, this first pair, I called Adam and Eve – *Adam* to symbolize the first, and *Eve* because I knew mankind was on the eve of a new dawn. I made their small part of the world safe and bountiful, protecting them as you would shield the first flickers of a fire from the wind. They sensed they were somehow blessed, as did their children…or, I should say, as did the children who carried the gene.

"Genetics, the random combinations which produce each of you, can be both wonderful and cruel. Any parent who has brought into this world a healthy child and also has suffered through the misery of bearing a fatally flawed child will tell you this.

"It was this fluke of genetics and its result which taught me my most profound lesson about mankind. One of the sons of Adam and Eve had the trait, perhaps even possessed it more strongly than the others. As I said, he sensed my protective presence. Rather than viewing it as the gift it was, he chose to see it as a reflection of himself, as his due, as proof he was superior to the others."

"You witnessed the birth of the ego."

“I realize the implications of that now. At the time I was, as any doting parent would be, blind to the potential for anything negative to arise within this line. My desire to experience the wonder of surprise was rewarded tenfold as Cain killed Abel.”

“Was Cain jealous of Abel because he also received Your attention?”

“To the contrary, Abel was one of the children without the trait. Because he did not possess it, Eve and Adam compensated, as would the parents of any children not blessed with the same abilities as their siblings. It was their attention to Abel which Cain resented. He misinterpreted my attention as a declaration of his superiority over others, killing Abel on a whim, as casually as you might kill a fly. Had it not been so, had he plotted to do it, I could have and would have stopped him. But he surprised me.”

The last sentence was spoken by Elohim with great sadness.

“Didn’t You think that was inevitable?” Reese asked. “Hadn’t You actually set the precedent by Your actions?”

“You are not the first to ask that of me. Upon losing her beloved son, Abel, Eve railed against me. She did not know of me specifically, yet her furor and despair caused her to curse the presence which had given them all a good life, the presence which she had always sensed. Her pain touched me, pierced me. It was to soothe her, to attempt to make her understand my motives, my plan, that I first spoke with Eve. In her motherly wisdom, she caused me to understand my mistake, the flaw in the environment I had created for her and for her family.

“From that day forth, Adam, Eve, and all of their progeny lived in the real world, facing the threats and dangers without the benefit of my protection, my intervention. The only exception was an extension of the reproductive lives of Adam and Eve and those of their offspring. That intervention eventually ceased, as well.”

“Her discussion with You was the partaking in the Tree of Knowledge? Why is it that religious history describes the event as an interaction with the devil?”

“Most people are not wise enough to understand that mankind is not capable of living in Eden. Rather than embracing the idyllic life, most will

become corrupted by it, will subvert it because it will never be enough for them."

"Like a spoiled child."

"Yes. That is an apt comparison. I was spoiling them, and Cain was the first to demonstrate the flaw of my actions. But, to answer your question, most of the faithful throughout history have believed that voluntarily forsaking Eden was unthinkable and could have only been effectuated by Lucifer rather than by their God.

"And like so many other misunderstandings of your history, there is a kernel of truth. For, you see, Lucifer had long been cast out of Heaven by the time of Adam and Eve. His thirst for experiences was frustrated by the available choices at the time."

"He also hoped for there to be a sentient being?"

"Yes, he did. In his own way, I am certain he shared my joy and excitement at the advent of mankind but for far different reasons. Thus, it was quite fortuitous for him when I decided to remove my influence, my presence. For under my watchful eye, he had no access to this new breed who interested him so. Opportunistically, immediately upon my withdrawal, he attempted to live through or occupy each of them, beginning with Adam and Eve. They rejected his presence. They ignored his whispered words, except for Cain within whom Lucifer found his first willing host from mankind. Thus began a struggle from which mankind has never escaped."

"Elohim, it seems to me there's quite a bit of a difference between allowing mankind to face the genuine struggles of life and allowing Lucifer free rein. I guess I don't understand why You didn't just nip the problem in the bud back then by removing Lucifer from the environment."

"My answer is twofold. Not only had I decided not to intervene, I had promised Eve I would not. At the time, the form and nature of a Heaven filled with mankind was beginning to take shape within my mind. Before Cain committed his foul deed, I believed that *all* of these new men and women would join me. His single heinous act destroyed that belief and made me realize that only some of his race would ever be fit to live in Heaven, to assume the power as well as the privileges which would accompany it.

“It was at that time when I also realized the utilitarian benefit of leaving Lucifer to roam free, unrestrained. If life on Earth would be a test, he would be my litmus paper, attracting those who would never be destined to reside with me, identifying them.”

“I am confused about one thing. You said Your creation of the angels was a disappointment because they were nothing but an image of their creator, of You, prompting You to set in motion the process of life on Earth. Was not Lucifer one of those creations? How could he become the being he is if he is nothing but an image of You? And how can his choices surprise You if he does not have the ability for such independence?”

Elohim stood up from the couch and joined Reese at the table, sitting across from him. Reese studied his face, trying to discern irritation from the questions. He saw none.

“There are two answers to your questions.

“To explain how Lucifer could come to be, I must remind you of our discussions regarding energy; it is the building block of all things.”

“I recall. I can’t possibly forget the orb of gold created from nothing.”

“The raw material from which it was produced was hardly ‘nothing.’ As I explained then, the amount of energy just in the space between my two hands was more than sufficient to produce an orb of a much greater magnitude. Indeed, I could have produced a ball the size of the Earth with what was available just in that small area. This ever-present energy is absolutely essential to life. Not only is everything created from energy, but it continues to require energy to exist. And all energy is in balance. For every unit of positive energy, there is an equal unit of negative. This is true throughout the universe.

“In my first attempt to create a cadre of angels for Heaven, I utilized only positive energy. The result was the creation of the beautiful and loving beings to whom I have referred before, beings who possessed, for lack of a better concept, no free will. In my attempt to vary this creation, I created another. This new being, Lucifer, was made from negative energy, and I immediately realized my error.”

“He was evil?”

“No. Not at all. It was a purely physical phenomenon. Negative energy is not inherently bad or evil. However, when a negative electrical charge encounters a positive on Earth, the effect is neutralization. As Lucifer, my newest creation, came within the proximity of another angel, the contact sapped him of his life force. Had I allowed them to connect, the result would have been the annihilation of one or both. I had no choice but to find another home for Lucifer. Since all of the others were from the positive side, his very presence in Heaven was destructive.”

“Why not destroy him then?”

“As I have said, I loved him as I loved the others of my creation. At that time, there was no evil within him. He was simply toxic to the others. If you had a child who was healthy, yet was the carrier of a disease which would kill your other children, would you destroy the child or simply quarantine this threat to the others?”

“So Earth became the quarantine?”

“It did. And on Earth, Lucifer, through humans, accomplished something he could not have attained on his own; he achieved independence…free will, in a manner of speaking…because of the symbiotic relationships he has had with mankind. His hosts have provided the ability to create, to deceive, and to surprise. His hosts have provided the mental and emotional framework he did not possess…which has caused him over these many years to resent me for casting him out, a conclusion he could not have reached without the perspective of mankind.”

“We taught him to hate.”

“Yes.”

“Why Earth? Why not another place in the universe?”

“It was my love for Lucifer which caused me to put him here. This was the place where I was to spend so much of my time and devote so much of my energy. It was this planet I intended to populate with my new creations – creations not born of purely positive energy, and therefore not endangered by his very fabric. Since he was barred from spending his eternity in Heaven, I believed it was only right that he shared in my work on Earth.”

“When we spoke of Lucifer before, You said if he changed his ways, he could return to Heaven?”

“No, my answer was that he could be forgiven. If he would forsake his ways, he could be redeemed.”

Thinking back, Reese recalled the discussion. “That is true. I do recall that now. You mentioned that his relationship with us is symbiotic. I understand that without us he would have no senses, no input. What do we gain from him in the relationship?”

“Energy. All things, including man, require energy to continue to exist. The nature of man is such that he may utilize energy from either pole, positive or negative. Lucifer is a conduit. As men allow themselves to become his vessels, they gain an easy access to this energy.”

Reese stared at Elohim for a moment, struggling to understand. “We need to recharge like a battery?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve always thought that the body satisfied its needs with food, drink, and sleep?”

“You are correct. Your body obtains all it needs from nutrients, water, and oxygen. It is your soul which requires this energy, your life force, your essence…that which lives on after your body expires.”

“My soul?”

“Yes. And if your soul does not, as you describe it, recharge during your lifetime, it will be lessened by the time your body dies. That is why it is so necessary to feed your soul throughout your life…for it may be much weakened after your time here is done.”

“How do we feed our soul?”

Elohim hesitated for a moment before saying, “This is a poor analogy, but think about the automobile. It has a battery which is required for the engine to start. Once started, the battery is not needed until the next time you turn the key. While the engine runs, it powers the automobile, as well as the lights, air conditioning, radio, and other devices. In addition to performing these functions, it also recharges the battery so the next time the engine is turned off, it can start again. However, if, as the engine runs, so much is demanded of it that it has nothing left over, no surplus to devote to recharging, the battery will weaken.

“This is so with man. Your body is the engine. It provides the mobility, the brain, and the senses. By eating, breathing, and sleeping, you fuel your body so that it may continue. This process, when functioning properly, converts the fuel into energy, most of which is utilized by the body. The surplus energy created by the body recharges the soul. If a person leads a life filled with conflict and struggle, if he or she is incessantly distracted by the negative or the evil of the world or simply becomes hedonistic and narcissistic enough to devote all of the available energy to self-gratification, there is then nothing left for the soul. And so it fades.”

“So, living a conflict-free life, a life where we are removed from evil distractions, a life devoted to our loved ones, is a life which feeds our soul?”

“Essentially, yes. Even your description has its pitfalls. It is possible, if you are a person who places your children’s needs above your own and you find yourself with an intensely hedonistic or narcissistic child, your attempts to please and satisfy and protect this child will also sap you of your energy, leaving nothing for your own soul.”

“I understand. It just sounds so New Age, or so 1968 San Francisco hippie.”

Elohim smiled and said, “Every movement, every philosophy contains some kernels of truth.”

“And Lucifer takes advantage of our need for energy?”

“He does. He, as any other angel, can tap into the energy around him and channel it. If a person allows him in and becomes his vessel, what the person receives in exchange is a recharge of his or her soul.”

“A recharge with only negative energy.”

“Yes. That is the only energy into which Lucifer may tap without damaging himself.”

“I know You said humans begin with our energy in balance, that is what allows Lucifer to interact with us without the catastrophic effect on him that touching a positive angel would have. But what happens to our soul if it is repeatedly recharged by only the negative?”

“What occurs is what you have already guessed. Your soul eventually becomes negatively charged. After a certain tipping point, your soul, like

Lucifer's very being, would prevent you from joining me in Heaven."

"Elohim, I can't believe I haven't asked this question before – what is the soul? Is it consciousness? Do all living things have one?"

"No, all living things do not have a soul. It is a gift to mankind. The soul is also not consciousness. Although the soul is exclusive to man, consciousness is not. Many animals are conscious and aware. Your brain, your mind, mutated prior to that glorious day I described when Adam swam the river, to create what you call consciousness and what I call free will."

"Then, what is it?"

Elohim, again hesitated, before answering. "I am about to share with you something I have never shared with a man before. There have been hints in the past…conclusions drawn…but never has there been an explanation."

"I'm honored."

"Let's simply say that you are both worthy as well as capable of understanding." Elohim leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and said, "As you know, on Earth the primary driving force behind all biological life is to reproduce."

Reese nodded, also leaning forward, sensing the import of what he was about to he told.

"That is a trait shared by all life, everywhere. It is not restricted to only the biological."

"What other life forms are there?"

"The first life form in the universe contained no material components; it was purely energy – a discreet energy form with consciousness. That life form, in fact, preceded the existence of the physical, or material, universe. It was that life form which created the universe consciously…deliberately, by manipulating the energy to bring matter into existence."

Reese's mind raced as he grasped what he was being told. "It was You?"

"It was. And it is."

"You are not what I see in front of me?"

"I am what you see, just as you are what you see in the mirror. I am that I am. This body, this form, is my home; it is my environment. It is a part of me…I am a part of it. Its mind is mine. Its thoughts influence me. By

choosing to be a combination of what I was and a person, I have become what you see.

"And I was also driven to reproduce. It was this desire, this basic urge, which first caused me to create the angels which were a pure replication of my original form. Yet, because they were created by me, rather than the genetically influenced offspring you so take for granted on Earth, they were essentially a clone with no distinction other than the singular polarity, as I explained before. It was not until I completed the laborious process of aiding and nurturing the evolution of biological life that I found a suitable host for my own offspring."

Reese was thunderstruck. Grasping for words, he managed to say, "Our souls are Your children?"

"They are."

"Aren't they also clones, without any real differentiation from You?"

"That is the beauty of mankind – the wondrous variability of each of you. For you see, upon the conception and birth of each child on Earth, I infuse it with a soul. That soul is my progeny. The two grow and develop together, one influenced by the other, and both becoming something they would not become alone, the whole becoming more than the sum of its parts. As with any true symbiotic relationship, both man and the soul have evolved together as well, until they reached a point of interdependence. Although the human body can physically survive without the soul, it becomes something less than what you would call a human. Without the soul, it lacks curiosity, it lacks a desire to live beyond the moment, it possesses no empathy. It is purely need-driven, self-absorbed, and hedonistic. The soul without a body, as I have explained, lives an existence of darkness and silence. It does not even possess the ability to sense. It can only think."

As Reese considered Elohim's words, the picture in his mind began to clear. So many questions he had carried with him since his early days in school found answers. "It finally makes sense to me. It's the missing piece to the puzzle."

"The missing piece?"

“The creation of the universe and the cultivating of mankind solely for the purpose of keeping You company never quite rang true to me. But now I understand. All life wishes to reproduce; You are, of course, correct. From human to the most basic or bizarre life forms, the lengths to which they will go to reproduce are phenomenal. You began as an energy form. You were able to split off from Yourself as does an amoeba, creating separate chunks of energy. Yet, unlike the amoeba which possesses DNA, You discovered You were not reproducing; You were merely segmenting Yourself.”

Elohim nodded, smiling.

“You needed something which would take this piece of You and turn it into a distinct being, related to You, springing from You, yet different, just as each of our children possess our traits, yet vary from us. You found that ability, that mechanism, in humans. Mankind became both the incubator and the school. Using mankind as a surrogate came with a price. In exchange for performing the service of the development of Your offspring, we became a part of the package, an integral part.”

“Reese, you are making it sound cold and harsh, yet your understanding is correct. It is not as cold and harsh as you describe because a very long time ago, when I realized the human form was inextricably linked to my children, I took one as well – the form that you see now. My original intent was only to be as were my children. I did not wish for there to be a difference which would separate us. As with any parent, I not only wanted to love them, I wanted them to love me. I realized that in their human form, which soon became apparent would be their permanent form, they would not be able to love an abstract field of energy as they would love a fellow person.”

“What form did You take? I mean, how did You choose one?”

“The choice was a rather obvious one. My search for the suitable biological partner for my children ended as Adam swam the river. It seemed only fitting to me to choose him as my permanent home, although I did not move in, so to speak, until the eventual end of his life on Earth.”

“You’re Adam?” Reese asked incredulously.

“The form you see before you is the man who once swam that river so many years ago.”

“But it isn’t, wasn’t an empty shell? Adam’s thoughts, his dreams, his loves…weren’t they all still in there?”

“Yes, they were. I explained that he has had an effect upon me. The person who was Adam is very much a component of that which I am.”

“I have a number of questions. One of the obvious questions is what became of Eve? Unless I misunderstood, she did not possess the skill necessary for free will, yet she was Adam’s…Your…mate and the mother of so many children who became the core of Your cultivated future generations. Is she in Heaven?”

“She is. And you are correct. She did not, and to this day does not, contain the skill. She has yet to surprise me with any act, any word, any thought.”

“But I thought….”

“You believed I would only bring into Heaven those with the skill?”

“I guess, yes.”

“You have attributed a profound pragmatism to me in the past. Implicit in that accusation is the belief that there can be no decisions based upon emotion. If that is the criterion, I fail. There have been times when I have acted as a result of great rage. There have also been moments when I have acted out of pure love. It was love for Lucifer which caused me to allow him to continue his existence. It was Adam’s love for Eve, as well as my own, which caused me to bring her into Heaven to live at our side.”

“I see. So, when it is said that all of the people on Earth are God’s children, it is literally true on, at least, two levels. Their souls are the offspring of, and actually segments of, what I guess I’ll call the original God. And their bodies are a direct descendant of Adam whom You have become.”

“That is true.”

“Are there any people on Earth who have not descended from You, from Adam? I mean, as You described, there were others at the time of Adam, others without the trait. Did any of their bloodlines survive?”

“Many of their bloodlines survived, but only by mating with an offspring of Adam and Eve. All of the others, those who did not join with this lineage, were simply out-competed and are gone.”

"With Your help, I'm sure."

"Actually not. There was no need. The advantage of the trait…call it the ability to surprise, call it unpredictability…was significant. As Adam and Eve's children proliferated, the competition for resources or mates became amazingly one-sided. And you must remember, they not only possessed the trait, they carried a soul."

"The soul made a survival difference?"

"It did. Without a soul, man would have never successfully banded together. Villages would not have been created. Societies would never have come into existence. States and nations would not be here today. It was the soul which first infused man with the urge for morals and ethics. It also promulgated the ability to empathize, which happened because of the connection felt between all souls. Since all souls come from me, a kinship exists between all people, making the entire human race brothers and sisters."

"So, You're not a subscriber to the current scientific fad that the evolution of morals and ethics is an inevitable, logical, and practical conclusion and that no God or no soul is needed?"

Smiling, Elohim said, "You'll notice in what I said a moment ago that the soul infuses an *urge* for morals and ethics. Your social scientists are correct. Morality and ethics would eventually be discovered by mankind. The problem arises when morality and ethics are viewed as innately equal to any other philosophy. At that point, as you have mentioned in your books and lectures, being moral or being ethical becomes just another situational choice. If something is gained by being such, then being such is what you will be. If a situation occurs in which abandoning your morals or your ethics brings a gain to you, the abandonment of them is mentally easy – easy because, after all, morality and ethics constitute just another philosophy, not superior to any other.

"The soul…my offspring…provided and continues to provide, the overview…the larger picture, not just of life on Earth but of a connection to the entire universe. It is that view, that connection, which makes ethics and morality much more than just another set of concepts. They become a necessary part of life. A person who is in tune with his or her soul will react

ethically and morally to all situations, even though the outcome may prove to be detrimental. This same person will also act ethically and morally when his or her actions will never be known by another person, even if temporarily suspending these standards could bring much gain."

"Is that the case because the soul is aware You are watching?"

"No." Elohim paused and grinned. "At least I don't believe so. I do grant I may be as guilty of parental blindness as you, but I believe what I describe is the case because the soul and the body, when they are truly connected and profoundly influenced by each other, recognize the critical essentialness of those two traits, an importance which transcends the self."

"Then what happens? Why isn't everyone like this?"

"At last we have returned to your original question. Why can I not make all people worthy of Heaven? I believe you now grasp the variables and the forces at play. The joining of each identical soul with each unique person results in a lifetime of negotiation and compromise between them. The temporal, sensual world is a powerful influence. The soul is a subtle force. All too often the wrong path is chosen. Add to this the pervasive and, at times, malignant influence of Lucifer. His learned resentment of his lot and his acquired hatred of me have transcended to a hatred of all that is mine, including my children. It is his eternal quest to divert as many of my children from the path of Heaven as he is able. He is driven by that impulse as well as the desire to feel, to see, to hear, to taste, and to smell as much as is possible through the bodies of men and women.

"I have already told you that both entities are changed by the intimate combination of the body and the soul. The farther from the path the body strays, so it takes the soul, tainting it, changing it, corrupting it, and occasionally destroying it."

"A soul can be destroyed?"

"In a sense, yes. Energy is never lost. That is a true rule of the universe. However, it can change. As you have seen with your own eyes, it can change from its initial state to become matter. Existing within a body, contributing to the process of the body's life, it is gradually dissipated. Without a steady supply of new energy, it is weakened. Lucifer understands this. He knows that if he can encourage a person to squander energy in a

never-ending search for gratification, that soul becomes weak. The weakened soul can be replenished, recharged by the reservoir of energy to which he has access, rather than the energy it would take from its own body. This recharge is offered freely by Lucifer. Accepting his offer provides the person with an easy source for replenishment and the freedom to pursue his or her chosen lifestyle.

"What the person does not realize is that this bargain has a great cost. If the soul is recharged enough by Lucifer, by the single polarity which is all he has to offer, the soul loses its balance and becomes as is he – a pure negative energy."

"Which cannot ever be allowed into Heaven," Reese said.

"Yes."

"So what we always thought was a metaphorical battle between good and evil has its roots in physics?"

"That is true. And these lost souls, those who have become negatively charged and unable to join their kin in Heaven, are destined to remain on Earth."

"What happens to a lost soul when its body dies?"

"As the soul remains without benefit of the sensory input it so craves, it struggles to regain this input through others. It will, in fact, attempt to replace the soul of a newly born child with itself."

"Can it do that?"

"It can and does, all too frequently."

"So the child begins its life with a soul linked to Lucifer? Barred from Heaven from its first day?"

"Although your statements are essentially accurate, the outcome is not completely hopeless. The child does begin its life with a purely negative soul and therefore faces far greater difficulty in returning to the balance, to a point where entrance to Heaven is physically possible. The option to embrace the negative is always present for the child, always urging him or her to remain in that realm. However, a few, albeit very few, have found the strength and have been fortunate enough to find the guidance to persevere. Those few have been an immeasurable joy for me."

"These recoveries are rare?"

“They are quite rare, unfortunately.”

“I just want to make sure I have an accurate picture in my mind. You come down here periodically and skim off the good, taking them to Heaven. The bad or the negative, who are influenced by Lucifer, must remain. Either they are still alive and being bad, or their bodies have died, in which case either they are trying to kick out our souls and take us over or, at the very least, they are constantly attempting to live through us vicariously, trying to lead the rest of us down the same road to ruin. And the longer this goes on, the more of them accumulate here until pretty soon we’re up to our eyeballs in badness.”

Reese expected his summation to elicit a chuckle or at least a grin. Instead, it was met with a somber expression from Elohim.

“Does that about sum it up?”

“Yes, Reese, I’m afraid it nearly does. The only exception I would take to your description is the timetable.”

“You mean it isn’t pretty soon. It’s going to take more time?”

“The opposite, I’m afraid.”

“You’re saying our time is up?”

“At the risk of becoming melodramatic, I would say that your ‘pretty soon’ has arrived.”

Reese slowly dropped back into his chair. Studying Elohim’s face, he saw worry and sadness. “What does it mean?”

Elohim, appearing uncomfortable with his response, spoke slowly and softly. “I don’t know. As I have said many times, this entire construct was created and nurtured to encourage free will, unpredictability. What I can tell you is that it has become harder for those who wish to join me in Heaven to reach their goal.”

“How many are there around us? The negative souls?”

“In my presence, none. They avoid me.”

“Why is that? Are You a pure positive energy, like the angels? Would being near You destroy them?”

“No, my spiritual being is in balance, as is yours. Were this not so, I could not have created Lucifer, and I could not create each new balanced soul. I do not know why they avoid me. However, they are constantly

surrounding others. As we speak, just in the room where Claire and your children are, there are twenty such souls, tirelessly testing and probing, incessantly seeking access."

As Elohim described this scene, a shiver ran up Reese's spine. He felt an urgent need to leave Elohim, to join his family and somehow protect them.

Reading his thoughts, Elohim said, "There is nothing you can do. Nor is there anything which needs to be done. Your loved ones are strong. They have been tested from their births and have never once allowed an incursion into their beings."

"Can we sense them?"

"Yes, you can. Have you not noticed the peace you feel in my presence? I am not the source of that feeling. It is the absence of them."

"I have felt it, as have the others. It's strange because the only other occasions when I have felt anything similar were at certain times in certain churches in my past."

"You said 'certain churches' and I know of what you speak. Not all of the holy places are filled with the holy, and the various faiths have much work to do to remedy this. However, in the ones which are, the stranded souls do not enter. This is true of a Catholic church, a Jewish temple, or the houses of many of the other faiths, so long as the very beings of those who fill them are good."

Reese continued his attempt to read the impassive face of Elohim. Finally, he asked, "What's next?"

"I am afraid the remaining good are soon to be overwhelmed. I do not know this for certain, yet I fear it to be true. The day may be upon mankind where a turning point has been reached, where the forces of evil, of bad, of the negative are too strong, too pervasive to resist."

Elohim finished his thought and lapsed into silence, uninterrupted by Reese. Both gazed off to the side with unfocused stares, trying to visualize the future. After several minutes, Reese broke the quiet by asking, "This seems to be such a strange question to be asking You, but isn't there anything You can do?"

Distracted from his reverie, Elohim's blue eyes again focused on Reese. "Do you ask me if there is anything I can do or anything I am willing to do?"

Understanding the profound significance of the question, Reese said, "Let's start with 'can' do. I mean, let's go down the list. At this point, let's not rule anything out – for the purpose of the discussion, anyway. Can the others be removed from Earth?"

"Of course. That is within the realm of the possible. In fact, I have tried that in the past."

"What happened?"

"They returned. They are energy forms, not confined by gravity or locale. They simply migrated back to Earth."

"Why would they do that?"

"It is their home. This is also where they can find people whom they so desperately need. No, the only way to disperse them throughout the universe would be to destroy the Earth, which I am also capable of doing."

"I don't think that would be a solution."

"We are in agreement on that point."

"Can they be destroyed?"

"Again, remember, no energy can simply be destroyed."

"But what about what happened to Lynn Sheffield? That surely looked as though his soul was destroyed."

"My dear angel, Michael, deliberately removed Sheffield's soul from the body. Although Sheffield traveled the wrong path, his soul had not reached the level of purely negative. Michael's positive essence absorbed the remaining positive and neutralized the negative at some expense to Michael himself."

"I still don't understand the difference between destroyed and neutralized."

"Destroyed is just that…something existed, and now it does not. Matter, which is higher on the ladder than energy, is destroyed by breaking it down into its constituent parts. If you burn a piece of wood, you are merely converting it into other materials and releasing some of its energy. All of the things which made it wood still exist, yet the wood itself does not. There are

no constituent parts of energy. It is the basis for all things in the universe. The positive energy which is my angels and the negative energy which is Lucifer cannot simply go away. If the Archangel Michael, to remain with our example, were to confront Lucifer in person, he would simply be absorbed by Lucifer, for Lucifer's energy is far greater."

"You mentioned the discomfort Michael felt when he absorbed Sheffield's soul?"

"It is a difficult concept to describe to a biological being. But, just as there is a violent arc between a positive electric charge and a negative one, the collision between Lucifer and Michael would create a massive disruption within Michael, the closest an energy being can come to personally feeling pain without the aid of a human body. Lucifer would also be weakened because strength of energy is best visualized as its distance from neutral. The more purely positive or negative the energy, the stronger it is. A conflict with Michael would bring Lucifer closer to the neutral status."

"How did Lucifer become so much stronger than the angels?"

"It is their love for me, as well as for mankind, which through the ages has caused the angels to share their energy…their strength, just as parents will willingly give their own strength to their children – as parents literally do."

"Literally?"

"Yes. Loving fathers and mothers not only nurture their children, they freely transfer their own strength, their own energy, to them – a transaction which is occasionally, though not frequently, reciprocated."

"We weaken ourselves?"

"Yes. Lovingly and with an open heart. The absence of reciprocity is not always due to the children not also loving the parents, but rather, at the point where the children can begin to return this strength, it is demanded by a new family of their own. Such is the case for my angels. There has not yet been a single day when mankind has not needed their strength, their energy. And, throughout thousands of years, as my beloved angels have been giving of themselves so freely, Lucifer has never once given of his own energy. He has always taken. The negative energy he uses as a lure for the new

converts is taken from others who are already hopelessly within his camp. Much of the strength needed by man…given to man by the angels…was strength sapped by Lucifer. So we are now at a point where Lucifer has usurped the strength, the energy, and the power from many, leaving my angels far weaker than they once were. It is at that point where I now find myself."

The sadness from Elohim was palpable, washing over Reese like waves. Elohim's eyes once again diverted away, lost in an unspoken vision, and Reese felt himself slipping into a profound depression.

Forcing his mind clear, Reese said, "It is quite a paradox. In many ways, You have put into motion a situation You no longer control."

Without looking up, Elohim answered, "I have. My dream for a family, not realized without the creation of mankind, is now fouled by the very seeds which I planted. When we earlier discussed the attributes which you crave in your God, I told you it was your wish for God to be filled with the very emotions you have sought to control within yourself."

"I remember. I'm still not sure I agree."

"Nor am I certain you should. It may be that you are right. The dilemma from which I suffer today was caused by the decisions made from those emotions. I knew intellectually that not neutralizing Lucifer was a mistake. My own pride, my own compassion, and my own love for my creation kept me from doing it when I could. Those same feelings, those same emotions, caused me to put him on this Earth when I could have banished him to a distant place before he became addicted to mankind. My emotions caused me to allow him to mingle and eventually begin to corrupt my beloved children on Earth. Had I not done this, he would have been nothing but another discreet energy form in the universe, rather than the blight upon humanity which he has become. Mankind…my own children are suffering, and the fault is mine."

Reese stared at Elohim, uncomfortably. These revelations, coming from Elohim, disturbed him deeply. To break the silence, he asked, "Why are You telling me this? Why me? Why now?"

Once again Elohim's eyes slowly raised to meet Reese's. In a voice so soft it could barely be heard, Elohim answered, "Because I am afraid I am

at a loss. Because I seek your counsel."

Reese was, again, staggered by Elohim's comment. "You want *my* advice? Why me? You have the benefit of the thoughts of billions, the wisdom of the ages. Surely any conceivable idea I may have has paraded before You countless times."

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Elohim replied, "The vast majority of thoughts I have received from others are worse than a waste of time; they are tedium beyond description. Of the few whose minds are devoted to subjects more profound, the information is never on point. All which I have told you today is new to all of humankind and, as such, has not been the basis for scrutiny, analysis, and discussion. You must remember, all that happens on Earth is but a book to me. If the topic has not yet been written, there will be no thoughts from which I may gain insights.

"You, my child, are indeed a rare combination. Your intellect is nearly beyond compare. Your personal experiences…in fact, the most intense of them…directly dealt with a very similar dilemma, a dilemma you resolved both cleverly and compassionately. Your chosen field of study is precisely the area we are now discussing. You have mastered the skill of balancing your emotional urges with your intellectual conclusions, dismissing neither, nor being a slave to either – a skill I do not share."

"What of those who have joined You in Heaven? Certainly they must be aware of what's happening, the direction we are going. Is there no wisdom within that pool which You may tap?"

"Reese, would it be Heaven for you if, after you arrived, you spent your time immersed in the lives of the friends and relatives you left behind?"

"I thought you said…oh, that's right. The souls who watch us, those who remain peripherally involved in our lives, are those who have not yet joined You in Heaven."

"This is true, and it can be no other way."

"It just seems, I don't know, cold for them to turn their backs on us."

"Those who live in Heaven are anything but cold. Remember, Reese, the dilation of time. Once you arrive and spend a brief period acclimating to your new surroundings, creating your new environment, and settling in, more than a hundred years have passed on Earth. After but a single day in

Heaven, there is no one you have ever met remaining alive on Earth. Please do not misunderstand me. It is not that those who live with me in Heaven do not care. They simply trust in me. That trust is a massive element of the heavy weight I now feel."

Reese's mind raced through several other objections to Elohim's request, dismissing each of them unspoken. Finally, he said, "This is the true reason You have kept me with You through this visit."

"It is. I have agonized over the need to be deceitful…."

"No need. You told me at the time, during our first meeting, that there were some issues, some things which could not be explained until I was ready."

"Thank you for recalling those comments. Do I have your answer? Do I have your help?"

"You are asking me to assume enormous responsibilities, to play God."

"No. I am not asking for you to perform my function. I am asking you to advise me. I am asking that you show me an option, as of yet not conceived by me. My own emotions have blinded me, preventing me from seeing the solution. My hope is that your eyes will see it. The decision and the responsibility will be solely mine."

"I must leave if I am to do this. I need to be with Claire. May I share this with her?"

"I recognize your need to do so. She has become a welcome part of your thought processes. Of course you may share all of our words."

The decision made, Reese felt a calmness overtake him. True to the pattern of his whole life, he did not become anxious, did not panic when under pressure. "Before I go, I have one more question."

"Yes?"

"If Lucifer thrives upon the sensual input of people, why is he plotting to kill so many?"

"Individual life means nothing to him. Less than nothing. Mankind is allowed access to a place where he is forbidden to go, a place which he craves to occupy. And so he resents, even hates, each and every person on Earth. With every soul he blackens, with every person he turns away from the path, he reaps the satisfaction of not only hurting me and foiling my

plan, but also quenching his anger and hatred. You must recall that the relationship between the spirit and man is a two-way street. The spirit within a man changes him. The man, through which the spirit lives, alters the soul as well. Lucifer has never found the righteous to be a welcoming host for him. The only doors he may open are within those who are, at best, morally and ethically ambivalent or, at worst, evil. So he has immersed himself in the darkest of those among you throughout history. This has continued to amplify his evil tendencies."

"A nasty feedback loop."

"That is an apt description and is a part of the problem I, we, face today. The feedback loop, the vicious cycle, continues to intensify with each iteration, compounded by my removal of the best among you twice before."

"It's approaching a critical mass."

"Another appropriate metaphor. So, the answer to your question is that we are dealing with madness, an evil madness and a clever madness, yet madness nonetheless. It is a madness fed by contempt for me and for mankind. Very little of what Lucifer does will be logical, yet it will all be consistent, consistent with his hatred. Pain, death, misery, and despair… they all please him. Do not forget, each person he hurts…hurts me. He cannot inflict pain upon me directly, only through you."

"We are God's army, aren't we?"

"Quite literally, I'm afraid."

Reese started to rise, then paused and asked, "One more question. Where is he? Where is Lucifer hiding? Is he within one man or woman?"

Leaning back into his chair, Elohim answered, "I don't know."

"You don't know? How can that be?"

"The information I receive, all of it, comes from each person. Lucifer learned, ages ago, how to co-opt this information from the one within whom he resides. Nothing escapes. No thoughts, no emotions, nothing."

"I know it's still a little hard for me to visualize the information with which You are bombarded, but don't You notice when someone's transmission to You suddenly falls off the radar, so to speak?"

"I do. When Lucifer has possessed others in the past, the cessation of the messages from each poor soul told me quickly where he was. There

were times I intervened. There were times holy men stepped in, bringing the problem to my attention."

"Exorcisms."

"Yes. Lucifer learned. He realized that he must be more circumspect, more subtle, more discreet. He also learned that to avoid gaining my attention, he must occupy someone from the inception. He must take over that person before he or she can produce the very first message to me, the message which triggers my dispatching a new soul for that child. If he walks the Earth today, he does so within a man or a woman I have never met, physically or in any other way, someone who has been invisible to me."

"Great!"

"It is a frustrating situation for me, as well."

"I have no doubt about that." Standing up, Reese said, "I'll be going now. We don't have a lot of time."

Elohim stood. "Reese, thank you. I realize that by confessing my need, I have diminished myself in your eyes."

Reese stared at Elohim for some time before saying, "In fact, no. I haven't sorted it all out yet, and I'm concerned it may be my own ego speaking, but it actually has made me feel better. I just hope I can come up with something that will help."

"You will. Have no doubt of that."

Reese did not turn immediately, and Elohim stepped forward, encircling Reese with his arms. The powerful, coursing feeling of joy again filled Reese, and he realized at that moment how much he had been craving another contact. When they parted, he asked, "What is that phenomenon, exactly? I mean, it's different for each of us. What are You doing when You touch us?"

Smiling for the first time in a while, Elohim answered, "My touch is but a mirror of what you are and what you have given to me. The joy you feel is my returning to you the joy you have given to me."

Chapter Thirty-One

Kaval slowly shifted his stare from one man seated at the table to the next. “A single explosion, when we planned seven, is not a success. It is a failure! Failure can *not* be tolerated!”

The nine around the table squirmed uncomfortably. Each of them knew, or suspected, that the reason for the dismal results of their latest efforts was Kaval himself. The news broadcasts had hinted at the trail followed by the government agents. It had been his sloppiness, his over-confidence, and his arrogance which provided the FBI with too many clues, too many leads to follow. None of them dared to speak what they thought, knowing the consequences of such an act. Instead, they all stared blankly forward, hoping their disgust did not show.

“We have less than twenty-four hours,” he continued. “The material is in place and the personnel are ready. *This time…we must succeed*,” he shouted, as he balled his hands into fists and pounded them both on the tabletop for emphasis.

א

Thomas Eades, Margo Jackson, Bill Burke, and Ricki Darling were huddled in Burke’s office, joined by Dick Williams and George Collins.

Burke asked Collins, “Does the CIA have anything on Kaval yet?”

“We believe he’s in Prague, but that’s it. None of our people have been able to find him in that city so far. We’re not even sure he’s still there.”

Williams asked, “I’ve got to report something back to the President. Do we have anything from Johnson more specific than the vague comment from Elohim?”

Margo looked witheringly at the National Security Advisor. “That ‘vague comment’ was relayed to us by one of the brightest people around. And he obtained it from God, who, in case you’ve forgotten, knows what every person on the planet is thinking.”

The NSA chief immediately became defensive. “I’m not saying that it’s nothing. All I’m asking is whether we’ve gotten anything more concrete yet?”

Darling, trying to avert a confrontation between the two, jumped in, “There is a lot of chatter right now, but nothing we can hang our hats on.”

“People, please…. If the perpetrators stay true to pattern, they’ll try to pull something by tomorrow evening before Elohim leaves,” said Burke. “Since their latest plot fizzled, they must be scrambling to put something together quickly. Doing something too fast results in mistakes, sloppiness. We’ve got to be ready to capitalize the first time they tip their hand. George, are we getting any help in Europe?”

The head spy looked dejected. Sighing heavily, he said, “I’m starting to feel like the only kid on the block out there. With the exception of the UK and Israel, I can’t even get the top guys on the phone. France, Germany, Russia, any of the Scandinavian countries, Eastern Europe, you name it… all I get are number three or number four on the totem pole. As Yogi Berra said, it’s *déjà vu* all over again.”

Collins’ comment piqued Bill Burke’s interest. “What do you mean?”

“The reality of international relations,” he answered, “is like a marriage. Long before the divorce papers are filed, the dumpee starts to notice little things coming from the dumper. He forgets to get her a gift for her birthday. She doesn’t kiss him good night before he falls asleep. Little signs tell them that it’s over, but they’re not quite ready to burn the bridge yet. That’s how it feels with other countries when they’ve made up their minds to switch allegiances but aren’t quite ready to tell you. A few years ago, when I was just Assistant Director, if I called Interpol, the top guy took my call. It didn’t matter if he was in a big meeting, he’d step out and take it. He talked to me because it was the U.S. calling. Now, I’m the Director and the best I can do is his secretary. And she promises to ‘do her best’ to get him to return my call before the week is out.”

“So we’re being dumped?” asked Margo.

“I think so.”

“By whom?”

“All of them. At least, that’s what it feels like. If I confront them about all the little stuff, I just get babble about how busy they are with urgent matters. They assure me nothing is wrong, everything is fine. Jacque, at the Surité, told me I was being too sensitive, too thin-skinned. But I don’t think, hell, I know I’m not imagining this.”

Williams, hearing something juicy enough to carry back to the White House, asked, “When you say all of them, are you talking about the European Union?”

Collins, sharing Margo’s dislike for the President’s staffer, answered without looking in his direction. “Yes. The EU.”

“They don’t need us anymore,” commented Burke.

“You’re right; they don’t.”

Margo added, “It is like the marriage going sour. Once the husband gets the degree, he dumps the wife who worked to put him through college.”

“Or, as soon as the wife’s career takes off and she’s making more than the husband, she dumps him,” said Ricki Darling.

“That’s pretty much it,” confirmed Collins. “When the Soviet Union was around, there was this big, looming threat, hanging like a cloud over Europe. They all knew they couldn’t stand up to the giant alone, so they courted us, needing us to put the teeth into NATO. The Soviet Union collapsed, thanks to Reagan. The Russians certainly aren’t expressing any interest in dominating the world or even Europe, and they couldn’t do it even if that was what they wanted. We’ve become the blue-collar husband after the wife won the lottery. Not only don’t they need us, they see us as an embarrassment, as some unsophisticated oaf.”

“With the creation of the EU, the economics have also changed,” said Burke.

“They surely have,” answered Collins. “All of Europe is rapidly becoming a single country. The EU Council frequently trumps the individual governments of the member countries. The widespread use of the euro has allowed the Council essentially to blackmail each of the nations into submission. The only one really putting up a fight is the UK, and that fight is a losing battle for them.”

“It sounds as though they’re all becoming states…like here,” said Ricki.

“I think that’s the goal,” Collins concurred.

“Whose goal?” she asked. “Do all of those Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, Danes, and the rest really want to give up their national identities?”

“It’s like the frog in a pot,” answered Burke.

“You’re right,” agreed Collins. “That’s it exactly. Drop a frog in boiling water, and it’ll jump out. Put it in cool water and slowly turn up the heat, and you’ve got cooked frog. They all started out believing that joining the EU was like joining Costco. You know, it would increase their buying power, let them compete with us. Then security was added to the pile. Then environmental issues. One by one, these factors turned the heat up. Now the whole political structure is so tied to the EU that unraveling it would be a disaster. Plus, they’ve all been used to being citizens of smaller countries. The feeling of being a part of a superpower is attractive.”

Williams asked, “What’s the big deal anyway? If they want to get together and make one country, so what?”

George Collins closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “No big deal, Dick. None at all. As long as they remain our friends.”

“You’re saying they’re not?”

“I’m saying I’m not sure. I’m saying it feels as if it’s moving in the wrong direction.”

“You don’t think it’s just how they feel about our President?” Ricki Darling asked.

“No. I do think that might be a part of it. He’s too American, if you know what I mean. They’d prefer someone who asks their permission before he sneezes. He’s a little too independent for them, still acting as though we’re the only superpower on Earth.”

“Aren’t we?” asked Williams.

“In one sense, we are. Nobody can mess with us militarily. The problem is that we’ve become ashamed of our own might. In the area we dominate, we’ve been neutered. Once you remove that, the rest is population, economics, and world opinion. We aren’t doing well in those categories, compared to the EU and China.”

Bill Burke, listening carefully to this analysis, asked, “Do you think the events happening now, the attacks, are part of this plan?”

“The concept today in the modern world of power struggles,” Collins replied, “is to weaken your opponent. You can do that by withholding needed resources. You can do it by manipulating public opinion. You can dilute the national identity, as has happened in France and the UK. And it can be done by disrupting the lifestyle of the citizens. If the people of a country have a plentiful, happy, relatively carefree existence, they’re going to cling to it. If their lives become dominated by fear and uncertainty, they become ripe for a change, especially if they are repeatedly told they are paying for the sins of their government. At that point, a regime change becomes more palatable.”

Thomas Eades, quiet to this point, spoke up. “After 9/11, there were a lot of people – Americans – who believed that we deserved the attack, that we had brought it upon ourselves by our own actions in the Middle East.”

“Hell, there were some people who believed we did it ourselves, as an excuse to go into Iraq,” added Margo.

“When you reach that point, when enough people begin to believe or at least suspect the worst of their own government, it isn’t hard to imagine taking the next step,” Collins said quietly.

“Which is?” asked Burke.

“Subjugating your sovereignty to an international authority.”

“Oh, crap!” blurted Williams. “You’re a *one-worlder*?”

“Dick,” Collins snapped back, barely concealing his contempt, “first of all, creating a category of crackpot conspiracy theorists and dumping people into it to discredit them is an old technique. The Soviets used it…mainly Stalin…on anyone who dared to disagree with him. Secondly, nobody’s talking about a ‘one-world’ government. For that to happen, the Communist Chinese would have to be brought into the corral, along with all of Southeast Asia, India, and Africa. And that is not going to happen anytime soon!

“It’s a simple power struggle, and it’s happening in the same part of the world where power struggles have been going on since man climbed out of

the trees. Tell me this, what's the difference between what the EU is doing and what Hitler wanted to accomplish?"

Before Williams could answer, Collins continued, "Other than not having a head guy named Adolf, nothing. Hitler saw what was happening in the world and realized Germany was soon to be dwarfed by Russia, China, and the U.S. He knew the only solution was to absorb the rest of Europe. Add their people and their resources to Germany's, and you'd have a viable superpower. Add to that his belief that the Aryans were a superior race, and he obviously believed that the new super Germany would not only be viable, it would be the top dog. Cut through all of the crap, and the Japanese had the same motive for their part of the world. It all springs from a desire not to become inferior, not to become marginalized, as the individual European countries have become in recent decades since World War II."

Williams replied testily, "Thanks for the political science lecture, but there's one big difference. The EU isn't run by a dictator; it's managed by a council of all of the member countries."

Before Collins could respond, Eades answered, "Maybe a couple of poli-sci classes wouldn't hurt you, Dick, as long as you'd pick up a few history lessons along the way. When, in the history of mankind, has there ever been a major political power structure in existence which wasn't hijacked by an individual? George is right. The people who put together the EU have done all the heavy lifting and the dirty work, accomplishing something Hitler, the Kaiser – hell, going way back, the Moors – couldn't do. They've effectively rendered the borders invisible, created a single currency, removed all trade sanctions, and banded all of those countries together. And it has all happened without firing a shot, without losing a soldier. As George said, it's the same result Adolf wanted.

"What we have witnessed, since the end of World War II, is a paradigm shift in the way wars are fought. If you become too powerful, too unbeatable, the enemies don't go away, they go underground." Eades' voice contrasted Collins' in that Eades' was calm, soft, and nearly hypnotic. He continued, "But that's not the only change. When winning or losing wars was all about might, the swaggering, belligerent physical warrior was the primary player in the game. Think Patton. As the world reached the point

where head-on military confrontations against superpowers became suicide, the underground enemies became typified by cleverness, sneakiness, and deceit. Think Bin Laden.

"Whether the consolidation of Europe was a natural, political evolution or the result of some evil, secret conspiracy is irrelevant. The point is that the work is nearly done. The new European superpower is nearly finished. Now, all that's needed is a leader."

א

Nicholas Reynolds escorted Preston Bennett into the viewing room next to where Debbie Bennett was being interrogated. As Bennett looked through the one-way glass, he saw his wife seated at the bare table. Their lawyer sat to her side, his hand resting on hers. Preston could see the fear and anxiety on her face as Craig McWilliams and another agent Bennett did not recognize both paced behind her, asking questions.

"Nick, could I hear what they're saying?"

"Sorry, sir. That wouldn't be a good idea."

"Sure. I understand."

Bennett stood rock-steady, staring at her, trying to interpret what was happening. Even without the benefit of the sound, he could see her interrogators interrupt each of her answers with another comment or another question before she finished answering the prior one. They took turns firing their questions at her, feeding her anxiety by shouting them. He could tell they were shouting by watching Debbie as she jumped each time one of them spoke from behind her. Nicholas stood to the side, next to the viewing window, leaning against the wall and facing Preston.

"Has she said anything? I mean, you know, helpful?"

Reynolds looked quizzically at Bennett. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, has she said why she did it? Why she betrayed her country?"

"Oh, just the usual crap about loving America, seeing it going in a bad direction, wanting to put it back on track and make it a country she could be proud of again. They always see themselves as patriots."

"They? Who are 'they'?"

“There are two kinds of traitors. Some of them just do it for the money. Your wife doesn’t fall into that category. The others see themselves as cut from the same cloth as the founding fathers. They spout ‘true’ patriotism, the historical precedent for civil disobedience, and a deep, underlying love for a ‘just’ America where everyone is treated fairly and equally. I wish I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard that line. She’s in that group.”

Bennett just nodded, continuing to watch his wife. After a long silence, he murmured, “I never knew. I never suspected.”

“That’s the way it is sometimes,” Reynolds commented sympathetically.

They both remained frozen in place for several minutes – Bennett looking into the interrogation room, Reynolds leaning against the wall. Watching the view through the soundproof glass was like watching a movie with the sound muted. Debbie appeared to be on the verge of a breakdown, chewing her bottom lip as tears streamed down her cheeks. When the silence was again broken, it was by Bennett, who turned to face Reynolds and said, “There’s not much point in me staying here.”

“Okay.”

א

“Can we go to the arcade?” asked Matthew, swallowing the last bite of cake.

Claire looked over at Reese, who shrugged. “Okay. It’s…” – she looked at her watch – “6:45 now. Be up to the room by 9:00.”

Melissa held out her hand, smiling and saying nothing. Reese pulled one $20 bill from his wallet and handed it to her. She took it and said, “Thank you, Daddy. What about Matthew?”

“Very funny,” he answered. “That’s for both of you.”

She giggled softly, saying, “JK, bye,” and kissing him on the cheek.

As Melissa and Matthew crossed the crowded restaurant, Claire asked Reese, “JK?”

“Just kidding,” he explained.

“Got it.”

The restaurant was fairly crowded, but the tables were far apart, and the tuxedoed man at the grand piano was playing quietly enough to allow semi-

private conversations.

"Are you ready to tell me what the big deal is?" Claire asked.

"I guess so. I was just visualizing a nice, quiet chat in our room, but this will do."

Sipping her coffee, Claire said, "This must be something. We can go up now, if you want."

"Right," he replied sarcastically. "I walk in the door, and the first thing out of your mouth is that if you have to spend one more minute in a hotel room, you're going to blow up half of Toledo." Looking around the room, he added, "It's fine here."

"All right, then. What is it?"

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the edge of the table, and in a soft voice described his discussion with Elohim. As he neared the end of the narrative, Claire interrupted, "Good grief, I've been working my butt off for years to keep your ego under control, and now God has asked you for advice!"

"Well, that's the thing," Reese replied, grinning. "He succeeded where others have failed. The limits of my ego have finally been surpassed."

"What do you mean?"

"I just don't feel comfortable in this spot."

"I understand, believe me. 'Hello, I'm God, and I'm stumped. Please, Reese, tell Me what to do.' You're right, that's a bit much even for you." Sensing his tension, she reached across the white linen tablecloth and rested her hands on his. "Honey, it'll be fine. What Elohim said makes sense. He's created kind of a 'Catch-22' for Himself and needs a fresh set of eyes and a fresh mind to help Him unravel it. Who better than you? With me, of course, in the background advising you."

Reese shook his head and chuckled. "I can always count on you to put things into perspective."

"Damn straight!"

Reese's mind drifted back to the earlier meeting. "He just looked so troubled. I haven't seen Him quite like that before."

"Of course, He's sad. He's dealing with a bad kid. If ours did something wrong, even major like murder or something, would you bust them?"

"No. I couldn't do that. Could you?"

"Heck, no. It might be different if it was the Unabomber. I don't think his brother would have turned him in if it had just been one victim. He did it to stop the attacks, prevent more killing."

"Yeah. Even then, I'd try to stop him myself before I turned him over to the system."

"You know, it's weird," said Claire.

"What's that?"

"Well, we're both saying that if our kids killed another human being, we wouldn't turn them in. Yet we both have the mark…we're both going to Heaven tomorrow night. Does that sound like the kind of behavior one of the Chosen would exhibit?"

"Well, it may not be the ideal behavior for a person living in this society, but it makes sense from Elohim's perspective. His own actions regarding Lucifer tell us that. Remember, if individuals do something bad here on Earth, regardless of what their parents may or may not do, they've got to face Elohim's judgment. And the impression I get from talking to Him is that the people here who do bad things are under Lucifer's thrall."

"The devil made me do it?"

Reese laughed. "Pretty much. Not so much 'made me do it' as gave permission."

"From what you said, he gives all of us permission."

"He does. The scene Elohim described of twenty spirits circling around you and the kids, looking for a way in, really spooked me."

Unconsciously, Claire's eyes darted around their immediate area. "Yeah…me, too."

"Anyway, I guess the way Elohim looks at it is that they aren't guilty of the crime…they're guilty of being weak. Certainly a lesser offense."

"So He's created an environment where, because of His hands-off policy on Lucifer and the other bad spirits…," Claire paused. "Why do I feel as though I'm acting in the opening scene of a grade B horror movie, saying these lines?" She took a deep breath and continued, "We're bombarded all the time with these negative spirits, whispering in our heads, urging us to let them in. Tell me again why He doesn't just zap these spirits

at the same time He takes the good folks with Him. You know, just to even things up for the next round."

"There are two reasons. If He removes them to another spot in the universe, they come back. This is their home. This is where the people are. So His only other choice is to make them cease to exist by absorbing them, the way we saw the angel Michael do with Sheffield. That solution is forever. They're still His offspring, His children, and He can't make Himself do that any more than we could. And, every once in a while, one of them ends up taking over someone who is strong enough to get the spirit back on track."

"Who pulls that off? It seems like a pretty major accomplishment."

"According to Elohim, mostly monks and nuns. It is a personal mission for them to save the soul within them, even though it isn't their own, original soul."

"I've always wondered why they do what they do. I mean, the nuns who live in those cloisters spend every waking minute praying. I've always admired their dedication but I never could see the point."

"If you think about it, it makes sense. It's a little like reprogramming a brainwashed cult member. Except it's inside you. They both, the monks and the nuns, take the vow of celibacy, cut themselves off from all of the temptations and indulgences of society, and spend all of their time repeating positive messages to their own souls. When you do get a chance to speak with them…and I never have spoken with a cloistered nun, but I have with a few monks while doing research…the message is the same. They sleep on hard beds, live in rooms that are no better than cells, eat meager meals for sustenance only, rarely speak, kneel for hours on wooden or stone floors, and all of the other things they do because they must serve penance."

"Penance for what?"

"They've never said, to me at least. Probably because they don't know consciously. But the net result is that they take a bad soul as their own, remove that soul from everything it values and craves, deny it any indulgence whatsoever, and devote their lives to rescuing it from its apparent destiny."

"Wow!" Claire said, her face expressing a newfound respect.

“And the way Elohim describes the recharge which must occur, the souls draw their energy from us. It has to be surplus energy created by our bodies but not needed to get through our days. The nuns and the monks seem to minimize the demands upon the energy created by them, devoting as much of it as possible not only to recharging the soul, but also to rebalancing the polarity, neutralizing the negative charge which comes from hanging out with the devil.”

Claire stared at Reese with a half smile on her face. “Well, at least I don’t feel as though I’m in a grade B horror movie anymore. Now, I’m in a shop which sells magic crystals, herbal tea, and books by Drunvalo.”

“Yeah, I touched on that with Elohim. His response was that there’s a little bit of truth in every movement.”

“We’d better get back to your issue. I mean, if you’re going to solve a problem Elohim has been working on with the benefit of all of the minds on Earth for thousands of years, and do it before breakfast, we should probably focus on it.”

Grinning, Reese replied, “What’s the rush?”

They both fell into silence, obviously contemplating the question. After a minute or two of quiet, Claire asked, “And He doesn’t know where Lucifer is?”

“Apparently not. Lucifer has had hundreds of thousands of years to learn how to conceal himself from Elohim. I guess he perfected the technique.”

“It’d be nice if we could help Elohim find him.”

“I suppose. I just don’t think Elohim knows what to do with him once He finds him.”

א

Lazlo watched the two teenagers from the corner of his eye as he played an old-fashioned pinball machine in the hotel arcade. The girl was playing Skee-Ball, stacking her acquired coupons on the ledge beside her. Her brother was two machines away from her, completely immersed in

maneuvering a virtual red Ferrari at high speed through the streets of San Francisco.

There was not any practical way he could accomplish his assignment in the crowded arcade. He would need to make his move during the return trip to their room. His mind began planning it out while his fingers absently tapped the flipper buttons on the sides of the machine. He was silently thankful the opportunity finally presented itself, as this was the first time they had been separated from their mother in more than a day.

One after another, Lazlo visualized and discarded several plans. He had already rejected the arcade as much too crowded. The lobby was also problematic, too many people, he reasoned coldly. That left the elevator and the hallway on their floor. The hallway was risky. He was alone, and there were two of them. If one screamed, as surely would happen before he could overpower them both, a door to one of the rooms could open and someone helpful could arrive very quickly. No, he thought, the elevator was his only option. And he would need to ensure that they were alone for the ride up.

Lazlo was looking forward to the night. His boss had been explicit. These two kids had the mark; they were going with Elohim tomorrow night. There would not be much gained by killing them. On the other hand, per his instructions, twenty-four hours of brutalizing and rape would be an appropriate going-away present, not only for them but for their parents, as well. He knew he had been chosen for this assignment because he would relish the work.

The girl, Melissa, was a pretty mid-teenager. Dark brown hair, which fell beyond her shoulders, swirled with each of her enthusiastic tosses of the wooden balls. Although her normal attire, as Lazlo had observed recently, was not-too-tight blue jeans and an oversized T-shirt, tonight, out of deference for the hotel restaurant's dress code, she wore a long skirt and a white blouse, buttoned to the top, concealing her young figure. Lazlo looked forward to revealing it later. The boy, Matthew, had short hair by today's fashion standards. He also wore a button-down shirt, and his choice for slacks was a pair of Dockers, pulled up to his waist and belted, rather than sagging down to match the current prison style of the gangs.

He had hoped they would be wearing impractical footwear, such as flip-flops, impeding their ability to run. Unfortunately, again probably due to the dress code, they both wore regular shoes, probably Sketchers, with rubber soles. Oh, well, he thought to himself, he would just have to make certain they did not run.

א

"Tonight might be my last chance to talk with Reese before we leave," said Reynolds to Craig McWilliams.

"You're probably right, Nicholas," answered Craig, between bites on the vending-machine tuna sandwich. "But this is also his last evening here with his family. Maybe you should call him."

"Tried that. Goes straight to voice mail. Tried his room, no answer. You might be right. He probably is just tuning out for the night, ignoring everything and just hanging out with Claire and the kids."

"Did you leave messages?"

"Yes. On his cell phone and at the front desk."

"Okay. If he doesn't give you a call within a couple of hours, maybe we worry."

"Sounds like a plan. How's it been going in there with Debbie Bennett?"

"I don't think she's going to be much of a source. As far as she was concerned, she was just helping the cause – the cause as defined by William Stavros. According to her, she has never met Kaval."

"How'd she meet Stavros?"

"It's ironic. Preston introduced them. I guess it was at some Washington dinner party."

"Ironic, yeah. How long has she been feeding Stavros information?"

"Quite a while. About three years."

"Did it all go to Kaval?"

"Most of it, apparently. Margo's talking to Stavros. A lot of it Stavros just used for political stuff. He hates the President, you know."

Reynolds laughed. "No kidding."

“A lot of the information trickled to the ‘right’ people on the other side of the aisle. Things they could use to make the Chief look bad.”

“Same thing with the UN, I’m sure,” added Reynolds. “There have been occasions over the past few years when Kaval smeared egg on our faces with information he shouldn’t have known.”

“True. Well, the boss wasn’t really liked very well by that group, either.”

“You know,” Reynolds said thoughtfully, “this is a little strange. I mean, usually, when prominent people like Preston get compromised by their wives, doesn’t it start long before the marriage?”

“A lot of times, yes. A spy agency will hook up its own agents with head guys on the other side, trying to make a marriage happen. Sometimes it does. Our own pals at the CIA have managed to do it, also. You know the cases.”

Reynolds nodded.

“The information Debbie Bennett was turning over made her a spy de facto, but she wasn’t the classic, career spy who was trained to infiltrate. It looks as though she was just a bored, idealistic housewife. The life of a diplomat’s wife was tedious, and throwing in with Stavros was exciting. Add to that the fact that she was politically a basic ‘peace, love, and rock ’n roll’ kind of person, married to a man who worked in an administration not really well liked by that group, and you’ve got all the ingredients needed to turn someone.”

“And Stavros was probably always on the lookout for just that type.”

“I’m sure.”

Craig finished his sandwich, crumpling the wrapper and tossing it into the trash can. “I think I’ll go back in for a little while and take another whack at her before calling it a night. What are you going to do?”

“As tasty as that sandwich looked, I think I’ll go grab a bite somewhere and then head back to the room.”

“See you in the morning.”

“Yeah. You, too.”

Margo Jackson sat across the desk from William Stavros, fighting back her own fatigue and marveling at his energy level. Rather than taking him into the FBI offices for more questioning, she had decided to allow him back into his own office. Maybe sitting behind his desk would help him to forget about the federal charges he was facing and prompt him to be even more helpful in nailing Suri Kaval.

Stavros' eyes darted around the bank of monitors, as they usually did, searching for an image to pique his interest. The technicians had removed the hard drives from his two computers and, at Margo's request, burned a ghost image of each onto new drives which were then installed in the machines to restore their functionality. Again, she was playing a hunch, hoping his unfettered access to all of his information would somehow help her.

Without his eyes leaving the frenetic searching of the televisions, Stavros asked, "So he's up to something else, huh?"

It was a rhetorical question, asked several times since Margo had, in general terms, disclosed Reese's concern to him. She recognized by now that this was his technique to direct his thoughts, so she did not respond, allowing his mind to work on the problem.

As she observed Stavros, Margo could not help but think that it was such a waste – a man of his drive, intelligence, and energy soon to go to a federal penitentiary for his part in the conspiracies hatched by Kaval. His cooperation during this day would substantially mitigate the sentence, yet he would still spend years behind bars. It was a testament to his ability to focus his mind, at a time when most would be overwhelmed with the reality of their situation, that he was able to mentally sift through the multitude of facts, coming up with helpful nuggets for Margo.

William Stavros' cooperation began the moment it became obvious to him that he had been nothing but a pawn to Suri Kaval, a pawn gladly sacrificed when the need arose. Obviously, Kaval had framed him, set him up to take the heat. And yet, in all of the hours of conversation with Margo, Stavros had not once gone on a tirade against Kaval. There had been no outbursts, no rantings swearing revenge – only a calm, methodical

dissection of all of their dealings together, searching for any piece of the puzzle which might help.

Margo had no idea how things would play out for Stavros in a courtroom, but, personally, she was convinced he was not an evil man. She believed he had no knowledge of or involvement in any of the attacks. She did not think he was a patriot, if the criterion was a tendency to put one's own country above all others. Far from it, in fact. He truly was a believer in the 'community of man,' a belief which transcended all borders, races, religions, and any other distinctions.

Stavros was the embodiment of the nebulous and nefarious conspirators the one-worlders believed existed, the same one-worlders Dick Williams had accused George Collins of promoting. Stavros suddenly turned his attention from the screens, seeing Margo gazing at him. "I've read the transcripts, you know, all of them."

"That's quite a feat," she answered.

He shrugged dismissively. "I read them last night."

"You must be one of those speed-readers."

Instead of acknowledging her comment, he continued, "So, tomorrow night you go to Heaven?"

Margo nodded and said, "That's what I've been told."

"If, when you get there, the first thing you do is take a quick nap, by the time you wake up, I'll be out of prison, maybe dead."

"I don't think it's quite that fast."

"Well, out of prison, probably."

"Probably."

His eyes bored into hers. "Looked at that way, it doesn't seem too bad."

She could not help but smile at him. "No. I guess it doesn't."

Neither spoke for a moment, and then he continued, "I was so damn sure."

"About what?"

"God. Religion. All of it."

"A lot of people were. Some still are."

"Did you ever doubt it?"

“Several times. I understand how He works a little better now, but when really horrible things happened, I asked the same question everybody asks. You know, if there is a God, how could He let this occur? How about you? Did you ever believe?”

“Not really. I think, in retrospect, I confused the messenger with the message. Both of my parents were very religious. Talked about it all the time. Went to church regularly. Gave money to the church, a lot of money. But, as people, they were scum – they cheated; they stole; they lied; and they destroyed other people’s lives. They did whatever it took to get what they wanted and then sat in our living room in the evening and bragged about it, laughed about it as though it was some game or something. From a young age, I hated them. Both of them. I guess I decided to hate their god, too.”

“Elohim wasn’t…isn’t their God. He has a special plan for people like that.”

“I figured that out about halfway through the transcripts.”

“Good.”

“Reading them scared me, though.”

“Why?”

“The part about the devil living through us or living through the people who let him in. It was easier before. If you don’t believe in a god, you don’t believe in the devil. When I realized that I was a patsy for Kaval, that I was being used – my money, my organization, and my people were all being used to do rotten things, things much worse than anything my parents ever did – I started wondering if he could be in me.”

“You mean Lucifer himself? Like possession?”

“No. I think I’d know if that were the case. I’m just talking about the millions of people Elohim described, the ones who allow him to tap into them, darken their souls, lead them down the wrong road…whether I’m one of those.”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve got a pretty good gut. What does it tell you?”

Without hesitating, Margo answered, “You probably are.”

Stavros broke the intense eye contact, staring down at his desk. Shaking his head as if trying to eradicate an errant thought, he cleared his throat and said, “From a practical standpoint, that’s not good.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Well, if he’s tapped into me, isn’t he listening to us right now? I’m, like, carrying a wire for the devil, except it’s one we can’t just rip off and drop in the toilet.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

A slight smile curling one side of his lips, he said, “You were just worrying about my eternal soul?”

One single, breathy chuckle came from Margo as she answered, “I thought maybe you might be.”

“There’s plenty of time for that later. Right now, we need to stop him.”

ℵ

Matthew finished playing his last token and glanced at the clock. Threading his way through the crowded arcade, he found his sister at the glass counter, redeeming her Skee-Ball coupons for a large stuffed rabbit. “It’s 9:03,” he said to Melissa, pointing at the wall clock behind the counter.

“Okay, okay. Let’s go.”

Hugging the huge rabbit close to her, she turned to follow him as he pushed through the mass of kids clogging the aisle. When they exited into the relatively empty lobby, Matthew fell back to walk alongside her, asking, “What’daya think you can take with you tomorrow night?”

His sister’s eyes widened at the question. “Oh. I really haven’t been thinking about that.”

“Really?” he said sarcastically. They crossed the lobby to the row of elevators. The doors were still open on one of them. “C’mon, hurry up.” The elevator was occupied by four young men who looked like college students with a bit too much to drink. The doors started to close but Matthew shouted, “Hold the door!”

One of the occupants reached out and stopped the door at midpoint, saying, “Hurry up, kid.”

Matthew and Melissa were about to step through the open doors, when a middle-aged man approached them from the side and said, “Excuse me, young man, could you help me?”

Matthew paused, eyeing the open elevator and then the man, before saying to the college boys, “Go ahead.”

As the doors closed, he turned to the man and asked, “Sure. What do you need?”

The man answered, “Ice. My wife sent me for ice. She said there was an ice machine in the lobby. I can’t find it.”

Rolling his eyes, Matthew said, “There’s a machine on each floor… right by the elevators…ice machine, Coke machine, and candy machine.”

The man shook his head, saying, “I didn’t notice. I’m so sorry.” As he spoke, he punched the button to call for another elevator. One of the other doors opened instantly, and Matthew and Melissa both went in, followed by the man. The stranger quickly pressed the button for the eighth floor, and the doors began to close. Matthew was reaching for the button for their floor, when a hand and arm suddenly squeezed through the elevator doors, triggering the sensor.

As the doors reopened, Melissa squealed, “Nicholas!”

“Hi, kids.” Nicholas Reynolds smiled as he entered, only glancing at the stranger. He stepped between Melissa and the man, turning to face both of them. Seeing the stuffed rabbit, Reynolds asked, “Where did you get that? A boyfriend?”

Melissa blushed as the elevator doors again closed, and the car began rising.

“Nooooo! I won it.”

Her answer, Matthew thought, was too loud and too animated.

The stranger from the lobby was concealed from both Matthew and Melissa by Reynolds’ body, so neither of them noticed the stranger reach into his pocket and remove a knife with a six-inch blade. In a sudden movement, Lazlo punched the elevator emergency stop button with his left hand while jamming the blade of the knife into Reynolds’ back.

Purely on instinct, Reynolds reacted immediately, raising his left elbow and spinning to face the attacker. The elbow violently connected with the

side of Lazlo's face, bouncing his head against the teak-wood panel, as Reynolds, with his right hand, pulled out his service pistol. Finishing his turn, he saw that the man was reaching for his gun as well, having it nearly out of the armpit holster. Worried about a ricochet injuring one of the children, Reynolds rammed his pistol deeply into Lazlo's abdomen while grabbing for his gun arm.

Melissa was immobilized from the sudden, unexpected fight between her friend and the stranger. Matthew had the presence of mind to press the alarm button on the control panel. He then whirled back to his sister who was staring wide-eyed at the struggle. Pressing his body against Melissa, he pushed her down to the floor, shielding her.

Lazlo, flooded with adrenaline, jerked his gun hand free from Reynolds' grip and tried to bring the barrel around, when he both heard and felt the thunderous report of Reynolds' weapon, the single slug ripping into his sternum and exiting through his spine, instantly paralyzing the bottom half of his body. Reynolds felt the gunman go limp and, pinning him against the wall, again grabbed for the gun; this time he was successful although the effort was not needed. Lazlo's eyes, inches from Reynolds' own, rolled back, exposing the bottom whites as his face became lifeless. Taking no chances, Nicholas pulled the semi-automatic from the dead man's fingers and stuffed it into his coat pocket. He then reached up to the man's neck and felt the carotid for a pulse, finding none. Only then was he satisfied that the stranger no longer presented a threat. He lowered the body slowly to the floor, leaving it propped in the corner, and turned to check on Matthew and Melissa, relieved to see them both huddled on the floor at the opposite corner. Matthew was still blanketing his sister's body, his hands covering her face.

"Are you two all right?"

Hearing his friend's voice, Matthew rolled over, releasing Melissa who was still clutching the rabbit. It was she who first noticed the knife still protruding from Reynolds' back. "NICHOLAS!" she shrieked, pointing.

For a moment Reynolds thought Lazlo had somehow come back to life, and as he spun around to check, he heard Matthew, in a shaky voice, say, "A knife. There's a knife in your back."

א

The emergency room doctor, a young, slender man from Pakistan, came through the double doors leading to the waiting room. Reese and Claire Johnson were seated on either side of Matthew and Melissa who were both curled up in uncomfortable chairs, trying to remain awake. Craig McWilliams was standing at the opposite side of the room, speaking with Bill Burke.

"Are you all with Agent Reynolds?" he asked. Although his speech was accentless, it still contained the tonal uniqueness of his home country's language.

Melissa nearly leaped from her chair and ran to the doctor. The others followed.

"Is he okay?" she asked, her voice intense with worry.

"He's fine. It is actually quite amazing. The knife blade missed all vital organs. I only needed to seal off some bleeding, which I did arthroscopically; however, that, too, was amazingly minor. Whoever decided to leave the knife inside the wound until the paramedics arrived made a very good choice."

"That was my brother," Melissa said proudly, pointing at Matthew.

The doctor turned to the young boy. "You may have saved his life."

Matthew did not reply, just smiled into the face of the doctor. Bill Burke showed his ID to the physician and said, "None of us are Agent Reynolds' family. I'm the Director of the FBI."

"I know. I recognize you from television. You were the gentleman brought back from death by Elohim. It is an honor to meet you." He extended his hand. Sincere reverence and awe were visible on the young doctor's face. "You must tell me, what is it like to be touched by Him?"

As Bill Burke reached out to shake his hand, Matthew said, "Look. He has the mark."

Everyone suddenly looked down to see the distinctive image on the doctor's palm. The Pakistani, clearly embarrassed, was frozen with his hand extended. Burke finally reached forward and grasped the offered hand,

shaking it firmly, as Claire said, “So, you’ll be going with us tomorrow…” – she glanced at the wall clock – “actually today.”

Looking around, he noticed the entire group before him also bore the mark. “Yes,” he answered, “I believe I am. It was something of a surprise.”

“It was a surprise for most of us, I think,” said Reese.

“I am Hindi. It is…was my belief that there was no Heaven. I did not expect to be called there. I was also surprised that He, Elohim, would call someone of the Hindu path. I had the impression that He was the…this is so awkward…I apologize…a Christian God.”

Reese started to explain, “The criteria for selection are based upon your character, not your affil….”

“I know,” he interrupted. “Since the mark appeared, I have read the transcripts on the Internet. You must be Doctor Johnson.”

“I am, and it’s Reese,” he replied, extending his hand. “A Hindu in Pakistan is rather rare.”

“Reese. My name is…well, my American friends call me Magi. And yes, it is rare. It is quite astute of you to recognize that I am Pakistani.”

“My pleasure, Magi.”

“Can we please see Nicholas?” asked Melissa, obviously having reached the end of her patience for the chatter.

“Yes. You may. I am sorry we became sidetracked. Normally, we impose a two-person limit, but I will make an exception for your group. Please, follow me.” He turned and walked back through the double doors, with the group in tow. As it was after midnight, the hospital hallway was dimly lit and quiet. Conversations between staff were whispered.

After two turns, they all arrived at the room. As soon as their destination was obvious, Melissa ran ahead, seeing Reynolds half propped up in the bed, smiling. She continued running, bumping the side of the bed a bit too hard as she threw her arms around him. “Nicholas! I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Reynolds grimaced from the embrace, and not wanting to make her feel bad, he fought down a groan. Seeing his face, Matthew said, “Melissa, you’re hurting him.”

She immediately let go, backing away from the bed a step. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, Melissa,” said Reynolds, smiling.

Claire, tears running down her cheeks, stepped between her children and leaned over, kissing Reynolds gently on the cheek. “Thank you, Nicholas. Thank you for saving our babies.”

“I never know what to say,” he answered, grinning broadly. “It was nothing? It’s my job? My pleasure?”

From behind Claire, Bill Burke said, “How about ‘you’re welcome’?”

Shaking his head, Nicholas said, “Okay, boss. You’re welcome. Anytime.”

“How are you feeling?” Burke asked.

“Actually, darn good. I’m serious. I feel as if I could get out of bed right now.” Looking back at Magi, who was hovering at the doorway, Reynolds continued, “Thanks to the doc. He didn’t even open me up. Just used one of those scopes.”

From behind them, the doctor commented, “You are a lucky man. There could not have been less damage to you if a surgeon had been the attacker.”

Reynolds, still smiling, said, “Luck had nothing to do with it. I have friends in high places.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

On this which is for some the final day on Earth, a gray, woolen blanket of clouds, which began as small, scattered tufts growing as the night circumnavigated the orb, swaddles the planet. Looking back from a vantage point in space, mankind's home appears to be a sphere dipped in a white batter. No meteorologists predicted the phenomenon, and not a single location on sea or land is touched by the rays of the sun. The transition from night to morning was from blackness into a murky, shadowy dimness.

The news and weather broadcasters calmly and matter-of-factly report the details of this unusual event, not bothering to speculate as to its cause. No climatologists are invited to sit in front of a microphone to discuss it. In lieu of what, in the recent past, would have been their normal method of coverage, some stations interview historians and theologians, looking for a connection between the beginnings of this day and other days in the distant past, relying upon the myths and lore passed down through the ages by word-of-mouth. As serious reporters listen while Mayan legends, Etruscan tales, Chinese descriptions, and Babylonian stories of a dark day are told, no modern expert is consulted for an opinion. The nebulous and vague versions of a morning long departed are allowed to stand. Each viewer, each person who watches and listens, is allowed to make his or her own determination.

Rarely in a lifetime, indeed rarely over the ages, do people rise from their sleep knowing with certainty their lives will change that day. Even more seldom do they wake up aware of an impending event which will change the state of civilization, of all human life on Earth. For many of those chosen, the small percentage of the population who bear the mark, the morning has been filled with ambivalence. Beginning their day, they have found that each sight, sound, smell, taste, or sensation has triggered an ennui – the same bittersweet sadness which washes over those who take a final tour of their newly sold home, after the furniture is packed and loaded, after the pictures are down from the walls, after all has been removed and prepared for transport. All has been removed except the memories, the

feelings imbued within the very walls, floor, and ceiling of what is to become their former home.

For those chosen, the day ahead will be filled with moments promising to be joyous and heartrending, as good-byes are spoken to those who have been close, to those who have been kind yet are destined to remain behind. Very few will speak of the "whys," the reasons for Elohim's choices, for neither those about to depart nor those remaining wish to dwell upon the mistakes which have been made in the past by those without the mark. This day some of the Chosen will find lifelong friends less than receptive, less than kind, less than pleasant, and less than happy for their good fortune. For these friends, the moment to embrace, to share memories, and to wish the other well will be lost to both, soon becoming a source of melancholy after the day has passed and the opportunity is forever gone.

Of those who are to be left behind, a few – far too few – will see this day as an opportunity to heed Elohim's admonition to blame none but themselves, to turn their attention toward lessons unlearned. They will be happy with the confirmation they have received, glad they possess the proof that their efforts toward becoming a better person are acknowledged. No longer will they suffer from doubt and uncertainty…the nagging suspicion that this fragile and tenuous life on Earth is all that exists and, once snuffed out, becomes no more than a memory in the minds and hearts of the living. For them, the parting of the curtain, the partial yet convincing evidence of a higher power and a potential for eternal life, will provide the added impetus needed to fulfill their positive potential.

For most of the others, they have bifurcated the bittersweet, embracing only the former, shunning the latter. The very mechanism within them which caused the domino-like cascade of decisions and choices throughout their entire lives, leaving them now standing at the station rather than boarding the train, is the same mechanism which will cause them to blame. No cogent or rational criteria will be employed as they choose whom or what to blame for their plight, save one, an exemption of self.

During the minutes and hours that pass on this gray day, they will remain consistent; they will continue to make the wrong choices. Instead of believing that the opportunity to have been one of the Chosen was within

their grasp, they will still prefer to believe that this particular brass ring has always been denied to them – denied to them by the social status into which they were born, by the color of their skin, by the preference their parents showed for a sibling, by their lack of attractiveness, by their inadequate height, by the color of their hair, or by a myriad of other superficial concerns, all of which have been granted far too much weight on the balancing scales of their minds. This list will continue endlessly, as these unfortunates, rather than looking within, spend the rest of their lifetimes honing the skill of finding the imagined culprits who have always denied them their due.

Among this group is also where a dark and turbulent pool of hatred and resentment is to be found. Although this anger is directed toward their perceived enemies – all of those who, they believe, have held them back and prevented them from reaping that which they believe they are owed – no respite from it is ever forthcoming. The objects of their hatred might beg them for forgiveness, might even die, ceasing to be a threat, yet the negative emotion will continue unabated. It must. Those who are blamed, those external objects, are nothing other than the innocent victims of transference. The angry ones have never allowed the true explanation to surface upon the sea of their consciousness. The true causes, the worthy targets for all of their hatred, anger, and resentment are those whom they can never accuse: themselves. And those are the enemy who will never repent, will never leave, and will never die, until do they.

In each corner of the world, as humankind begins this day, the former group awakes and sees the sky filled with clouds, and as they discover it is a phenomenon shrouding their entire Earth, they will gaze at it with wonder and anticipation. Those of the latter segment, seeing the same sky and learning of its pervasiveness, will look away with fear, feeling the ever-present anger begin to simmer yet again within their hearts.

א

Buck Langley unlashed the tarp fastened to the bow cleats of his fishing boat as he eyed the early morning sky, studying the belly of the dense

clouds which stretched to the horizon, wondering if this would be a good day to be out. Squinting, he stared east over the Pacific, trying to discern even the slightest hint of the rising sun through the grayness. Buck was a native Australian and third-generation fisherman. It was a matter of pride with him to unravel the subtle clues nature provided, making his own decisions about the coming weather for the day rather than relying upon the weather forecast available from the radio. Some of his friends had not heeded Buck's warnings in the past, deferring instead to the nameless, droning voice from the weather bureau. Their decisions cost them dearly in repairs to their boats or even, he recalled, cost them their lives.

Although the clouds were heavy and solid, the seas were quiet, nearly too calm. Pausing in his labor, Buck perched on the railing and pulled out his grandfather's pipe, biting down on the stem of it, not bothering to fill the bowl, and thought back to his childhood. It was the time of his life when each day seemed to last an eternity as he, his father, and his grandfather readied this same boat for the day's work. It was on one of those days that Buck acquired his name.

At his birth his mother had chosen the name Thomas for him. Yet once, during a sudden gale at sea, as all three generations of Langleys scrambled to tie down everything on deck that could move, Buck's grandfather yelled to him to lash the tiller which was swinging wildly in the tossing storm. Buck, only twelve at the time and unsure of his own strength, yelled back at his grandfather through the screeching winds to do it himself. His grandfather answered with a devilish grin, "I'm an old man. You're the young buck. You do it."

Through the blasting sea spray and gale-like wind, Buck laboriously made his way to the stern. With the heavy hemp rope under his arm, he grabbed the tiller and fought it, slipping wildly on the wet deck until he was able to hook the loop of the rope over the end, hitching it tightly. With everything secure, Buck joined his father and grandfather in the pilothouse to ride out the storm. Toweling the salt water from his face and weary of waiting for the compliment he thought he deserved, Buck said, "Not bad for a buck, huh?"

Buck loved the sea, the creaking of the boat. Even the smell that most people find so odious was a comfort to him. His father had retired two years ago, giving Buck the boat. It was the same boat inherited by his dad after the sea took his grandfather just two months after Buck's informal christening. Still feeling the pain, Buck recalled another squall…another scramble to batten down the boat…when a wave, mountainous by normal standards and small when compared to the almost mythical rogue waves, washed completely over the deck, nearly capsizing the boat. Buck and his father were huddled together against the pilothouse, shielded from the main force. Buck's grandfather was not so lucky. Exposed at the stern, performing the same deed which had resulted in Buck's name, Thaddeus Langley was swept instantly into the sea as he was attempting to secure the tiller.

There was nothing Buck and his father could do at the time but wait until the storm subsided. When the sea finally calmed, they searched for two days to no avail. For years, Buck felt the crushing weight of guilt over the loss. It was his father who, on another day at sea, looked at him and asked, "Would you rather it had been you?"

Without hesitation, Buck answered, "Yes."

Expecting his father to talk him off his position, anticipating all the clichés about how his grandfather had lived his life and Buck had his before him, the father surprised him by saying, "Me, too." There was nothing more comforting which could have been said, for Buck felt some of the loneliness lift from his shoulders.

Buck Langley continued to stare out at the dark and murky sea from his perch on the railing. Thirty years had passed since that day – tonnes of fish caught, tens of thousands of kilometers steamed. Along the way, Buck had acquired a loving wife who had given him two beautiful daughters whose noses wrinkled with disdain whenever they got within a hundred meters of the boat. For years Buck had dwelled sadly upon the fact that he would be the last Langley to sail this sturdy boat. Now, things had changed in a way he never expected.

"People need to eat," Buck said aloud, shaking himself out of his reverie and standing up. Since no one else was around, and so no ego was at

stake, he decided to check the radio for a weather update. Lightly traversing the gangway, he swung into the pilothouse, set his pipe on the table, and switched on the old tube radio, waiting for it to warm up. As he waited, Buck remembered his thermos of coffee still on the edge of the dock where he had placed it before wrestling with the tarp.

Back on deck he went, turning toward the bow. He espied the thermos, as well as the lunch packed by Penny, safely back from the edge of the dock where he had put them. Instead of climbing the rail and crossing back to the dock, Buck went to the port bow, shimmied himself halfway up the side and, holding the railing with one hand, swung the top of his body out away from the side of the boat, reaching for the edge of the dock.

As his fingers closed upon the paper bag, Buck heard a gruff voice from behind. “You’re gonna be dunked doin’ a darn fool thing like that.”

Momentarily startled, Buck realized his father must have come down to the boat this morning, perhaps for old times sake. Snatching the lunch and thermos with one sweep of his hand, he pulled himself upright and slid down, his shoes slapping on the wooden deck. Immediately, the sweet aroma of pipe tobacco filled his nostrils as he turned. He was confused, knowing his father had never taken up the habit.

There on the deck, standing by the door to the pilothouse, was his grandfather, Thaddeus, smiling at him and puffing on the old briar that Buck had set down just minutes ago. He looked younger than he had been when Buck last saw him. In fact, he looked close to Buck’s age. His mind whirled as Buck struggled to grasp what his senses were telling him, when Thaddeus interrupted his mental battle. “Are we ever going to get out on the water today and do some work, or have you turned this into a pleasure craft since I left?”

“Granddad?” was all Buck could ask, his voice breaking.

“It sure is, Buck,” was all he said, taking a step forward. The movement released Buck from his self-induced paralysis, and he ran forward, throwing his arms around his grandfather, somehow returned.

“How…why?” Buck, still bewildered, sputtered.

“Haven’t you been payin’ attention, boy? Today’s the day I get to go to Heaven.”

“But you’re here. You’re on the boat. You’re real.”

“We get our bodies back. We’re gonna need ’em up there.”

Thaddeus let go of his grandson and took a step back, saying, “Speakin’ of which…what do you think?” He held out his arms as if he were modeling a new sweater. “The sea took pretty good care of it, don’t you think?”

Buck stood back, staring. “You’re younger,” was all he could say.

“Heck, yes. That’s part of the deal. We get it back the way we want it. Are you gonna call your old man on that thing in your pocket and get him down here, or do I have to walk to his house and wake him up like I used to when he was a boy?”

“You know about cell phones?”

Thaddeus smiled. Stepping forward, he gently placed his hand on Buck’s shoulder and said, “Boy, I’ve been right here…with you and your dad…all these years. I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Here?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen every fish you’ve caught. I’ve seen every stupid stunt you’ve pulled. I’ve seen that beautiful wife of yours and those two wonderful daughters who love you very much.”

“But…I’m still confused.”

“Buck, today’s the day. You’ve got the mark. So does your family. You know we’re all leaving tonight, including those of us who’ve been waiting around for this load to be taken up.” Thaddeus grabbed Buck’s arms and said, “But before we go…we’ve got today…you, me, your dad. We’ve got a chance to go out one more time together.” The grandfather reached up, grasped Buck’s face with both hands, and looked him in the eye. “God, I’ve missed you, boy. Both of you.”

Tears streaming down his cheeks, Buck said, “We’ve missed you, Granddad.” Inhaling deeply, hoping to steady his voice, Buck pulled the cell phone from his pocket. “Is it okay if I don’t tell him you’re here? I want to surprise him.”

Chuckling, the grandfather answered, “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Buck. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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Cardinal Mario Bonavente stood before the bishops under his charge, glancing slowly at each of the men gathered. This morning he was fulfilling his part of the instructions passed down from the Holy See. It was not that he did not wish to meet with his bishops on his last day, only that he had wished for his statements to take on a different tone than the one dictated. For Mario was filled with a profound sadness. Less than ten percent of the priests and bishops in his Church had received the holy mark, the invitation to Heaven from Elohim. Although this was a larger segment than the general population, it was a pathetic outcome for a group who professed to be holy men.

The example for them all resided within the convents and cloisters of the Church where almost half of the nuns had been blessed with a key to Heaven. Sadly and yet proudly, Mario reflected, the same dedication to Jesus Christ and to the Church, which had led them to this honor, was now causing many of them to state their intention to remain behind. “We have much to learn from our sisters” was the point Mario had wished to make in his final speech this morning.

Taking a slow breath, he began, “May our Lord’s blessings be upon you this morning.” Mario paused as the group murmured their responses, then continued, “As you know, I will be leaving tonight, as will a few of the others who are joining us this morning. Today is the fulfillment of a long-made and long-kept promise from our Lord – a day of departure, a day of ascension. For some it is a day of vindication, for it shall be a day of proof, proof that their faith was more than a ‘superstition’ as many have believed and as many have accused this Church of propagating.

“For those about to embark upon this wondrous journey, there is little which needs to be said. My words today, the words from His Holiness in Rome, are intended for you who will stay behind. God, our Father, has joined us on Earth twice before and promises to come again. Yet, what is but a blink of an eye to Him will be several millennia here on our home, as it has been since His last visit. In the days that are to follow this day, there will be much work to be done. Each of you and your charges…your pastors, priests, and nuns…will find yourselves in a world where the very best have

been removed – not only the best within your own ranks, but the best within your parishes, cities, states, and countries.

"The absence of those who have left will have a profound impact upon all of you. Elohim has explained that the few Chosen in our midst are a stabilizing and civilizing influence upon all others. They are as a tent pole, rising above the group, supporting the shelter, keeping us all dry and warm, and setting an example for the rest. When they are gone, there are but two choices. Others must step up and assume the roles vacated by the Chosen, or the tent will come down upon everyone.

"In the coming days, weeks, months, and years, each of you will find it necessary to make many difficult choices. Elohim has described the time following each of His visits as a time of great tumult, fear, despair, and misery. We all pray against this course, hoping for an exception. But while we pray, we must also prepare. And the time for preparation is now, today, this minute, for the great storm approaches."

Mario hesitated, sipping from his water glass. Slowly exhaling a deep breath, he continued, "Of all of the choices you must make, your first choice must be to look within yourself for even the slightest tinge of envy, bitterness, or resentment for not being one of the Chosen. For to feel any of those emotions, one must have a lack of faith in the judgment of the Lord. And if one suffers from such a lack, although he may remain a member of this Church, he cannot be a leader within it.

"So, if you search your soul and find these feelings, you must leave. Do not be tempted to remain. Do not be lured by the comfort of your position, the uncertainty of what else you might do, the fear of change. For the time ahead will test your faith as it has never been tested. Our Pope has made it clear that in the impending battle, one hundred men of unshakable faith can resist an enemy which would overwhelm ten thousand men of doubt.

"Twin forces are locked in an eternal conflict throughout the world…as they have always been. Good and evil. The side of good is on the verge of losing some of the best from the flock, leaving a vacuum. The side of evil already wishes to fill this void. This may sound to some of you like a losing battle. After all, the Church, people of faith, and just good people have been on the retreat since before Elohim arrived. The world was already careening

toward a sinful, godless existence against which the Church appeared powerless. From now on, it would not be hard to assume that it can only get worse."

As Bonavente spoke, he saw many nearly imperceptible nods from his audience. He was certain they were not even aware they were doing it.

"If this is what you believe, you are wrong! For you have forgotten one single change which has touched every breathing soul on Earth…God's Love. He *has* come. He *has* fulfilled His promise. He *has* renewed that promise and will return again. His presence has wiped away the doubt in most. His touch has been felt by all. The world we lived in just one week ago was divided into three parts: those who believed in God, those who opposed God, and those who thought the first two groups were fools for believing in anything. Today, there are but two groups: those who believe in Him and love Him, and those who believe in Him and hate Him.

"In these few days your flock has grown severalfold for there can no longer be any doubt within the hearts of men and women. That God is our Creator was once a belief. It is now a fact. That a Heaven waits for those who are worthy is no longer a hope. It is a certainty. That God will judge all of us, individually, on our own merits, is no longer a vague possibility. It is an inevitability.

"We live in a world filled with hatred. Someone, somewhere in the world, hates each of you. Most of these people have never met you, nor ever will. Yet they hate you because of the color of your skin or your beliefs or the nation you call your home. They carry such hatred within them that they wish you dead. Or worse…they wish for your eternal damnation. There are also those who hate others only because the others are fat or only because they drive large vehicles or only because they smoke cigarettes. I am not saying obesity, extravagant consumption, and nicotine are good. They are clearly not, and our Lord and Teacher Jesus Christ has counseled against these habits. But are they worthy of hatred?

"One of the lessons we have learned these past few days, a lesson I fear many of us had forgotten, is how essential love is. God and His Son Jesus love us all: the American or the Chinese, the brown or the black, the slender or the obese, the Jew or the Muslim. God even loves Lucifer. God loves all

because all have sprung from Him. There are countless prayers, homilies, liturgies, and phrases within our faith reminding us of this love – words we have all spoken many times when comforting our parishioners. And yet, we have forgotten the significance, the profound importance, the reality of these words.

"The hatred I spoke of is but a tool. It is the sword of evil. Wielded by Lucifer and his followers, it is used to kill; this we all know. What we need to remember is that it is also used to divide, to fragment, to separate. Mankind has arisen from the morass of chaos and the primitive, primal quest for survival by banding together, putting aside differences, and recognizing the value and the benefit of working toward common goals. Hatred is the antithesis of community. Even if overt hatred is not visible, the undercurrents of hatred will cause everyone to hold back, not fully commit to the common good.

"We live in a time filled with much hatred, a lack of respect for others not of the same cohort, and intense feelings of aggressiveness, anger, surliness, contempt, disdain, abhorrence, revulsion, and disgust. These feelings splinter us, creating smaller and smaller groups, with each new group acquiring more and more enemies. New enemies are created every minute of the day, far faster than new friends can be made. It is time to step back and look at these things objectively and ask yourself why…why this is happening, and what can be done to reverse it before society consumes itself.

"If hatred is the solvent which dissolves the bonds of community, love is both the glue and the magnet which rejoin them…not only the Love of God, but the love we should all have for each other. As hatred, prompted by our differences, drives us all apart…it is this love, a love based upon our commonalities, which will pulls us all together. You must help those around you in their reactions. Nothing can stop a person from recognizing the differences in others. It is our nature. How we all react to those differences is what can be addressed.

"If you have a parishioner who is intensely passionate about the damage inflicted upon the Earth, you must encourage him to lobby, to cajole, to vote, and to perform every other civil option open to him to further his

cause. But you must…*must* counsel him, plead with him not to hate those who do not agree. He must be made to understand that the act of hatred, even if it is directed toward an evil person, is wrong…*it* is evil, in and of itself. Whether the object of hatred is a polluter, a racist, a killer, or a molester, the act of hating is wrong. Nothing of any good can come from this hatred – only polarization and the creation of others who hate.

"This will be your course in the days, weeks, months, and years to follow. No matter what the cause, no matter what the issue, it will be your task to be the calming influence on a turbulent society. It will be your role to remind everyone of what we have in common despite what may be driving us apart. It will be your mission to explain and to demonstrate God's love for all."

The Cardinal paused, taking another sip of his water. At that moment he wished for Elohim's power to read the thoughts of others. "One may wonder from where all of this hatred springs. Is it natural? Is it the normal human reaction? I can tell you the answer; it is 'no.' Hatred is not a bitter seed buried within each of us from conception. It is planted.

"There are men within this room who believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit…." As the Cardinal spoke these words, he, as well as all who gathered, touched the four corners of the crucifix upon themselves. "Yet, they have never accepted or believed in the reality of Lucifer. They have never truly embraced the belief in the embodiment of evil. For some, this lack was caused by shame or embarrassment, an unwillingness to espouse what they viewed as an ancient, uncomfortable, 'unmodern' myth. It was a position which they may have felt caused them to be seen as anachronisms, as marginal kooks by their own community.

"Elohim's words have described this fallen angel. The horrific deeds performed across the world in the past few days have demonstrated his hand. Just as the arrival of our Lord has blown away the mists of doubt which surrounded the reality of His love, these events have also confirmed the existence of this malignant presence. The same entity…who struggled to tempt our Lord in the garden and failed…has been whispering into the ears of men and women for the two thousand years since. How many of these poor souls possessed the same strength to resist?"

Pausing again to solemnly stare around the room, Mario asked, “How many people, upon hearing those whispers of temptation, turned to one of you, seeking to borrow the strength needed to oppose Satan and, instead, found in you someone who did not believe?” Not all of the men around the table returned the Cardinal’s stare as he, once again, sought to connect with each. “You cannot be of aid against an enemy you do not acknowledge.

“The world has changed so much since Jesus walked upon it. We have learned a great deal about many things. Science has lifted the veil and shown us much, answered many questions, solved many problems, helped us to be nourished and sheltered and safe. We have all reciprocated for those wonderful things by elevating science beyond the stature which it is due. We have all allowed science to surpass its primary and beneficial function and become the arbiter of reality. Science has progressed from stating only that which it could prove to proclaiming that all which it cannot prove must not truly exist. It is not the fault of scientists to assume this role, as they, for the most part, have been willing to assume the enormous responsibility which this entails. It is the fault of all others for granting them this final authority.

“When Jesus was resurrected, mankind could not fly through the sky in an airplane or travel into space itself. There was no pill to take to eradicate a raging bacteria, no contained atomic chain reaction to provide light and heat for all. People could not pluck cell phones from their pockets and speak to other people half the world away. Nor could a towering building be built, soaring into the sky and housing thousands at a time. Yes, much has changed. And it is tempting to believe that the words of our Lord must change, as well. But that is a belief which cannot be allowed.

“He described and demonstrated the importance of love. And as we have seen all around us, those words remain as true today as they were then. He also warned us of the dangers of temptation, the human tendency to succumb to the attractive path of self-indulgence and self-gratification. Those who oppose us, those who seek to argue against our philosophy, will say that it is our goal to deprive our flock of happiness, that we will lead them into a life devoid of joy and pleasure. It is a most clever argument, for it panders to the baser instincts of all. None wish to travel through their

days on Earth without the taste of delicious food and wine, without the warmth of friendship, without the satisfaction and comfort of a beautiful home, or without the intensity of physical love. You must remember that they have chosen this argument not because it is accurate or true, but because it works.

"We can and must demonstrate the untruth within it. Jesus does not wish for men or women to be deprived of these things. He joins in our happiness, so long as the happiness is deserved. He wishes for us to relish the taste of good food and fine wine, but only after we have ensured that our family, indeed our community, has enough to eat and drink, as well. That was the true message of the miracle of the wine and the bread. To eat and drink with gusto while your family is hungry is a sin. He is also pleased when we find and make a friend – as long as the friend is true, as long as the friend will not lead us down the wrong path. Jesus is happy when we have earned, through fair and honest work, the resources needed to build a beautiful home. It is only when this home is obtained through exploitation of others that it becomes something other than a source of happiness for our Lord. It does not matter to our Lord if you gild the walls of your home with gold. But, remember, if a man, through honest work and honest and fair dealings, amasses much gold, and he chooses to gild the inside walls of his home, he has created a beautiful environment. If, on the other hand, he chooses to gild the outside, as a reminder of his wealth to all who pass by, he has created something ugly. And the ugliness conveyed by his action is merely a reflection of the ugliness which is within him. All of you already know that the Church and our Lord rejoice in the physical union between a man and woman as long as the union is a part of the uniting of their hearts, minds, and souls in marriage.

"Who among you has not enjoyed a delicious meal, the companionship of a good friend, or the pleasure and comfort of a beautiful home?

"It is our responsibility to convey the distinctions I have described."

Pausing again, and lowering the tone of his voice, Bonavente asked, "Who among you, in the years since taking your vows with the Church, have experienced the pleasures of a physical union with another?"

As Mario looked each bishop in the eyes, he formed his own opinion as to who had transgressed. Keeping his intense gaze directly locked upon the eyes of one who looked the most guilty, he continued, his voice developing a nearly hypnotic cadence and timbre. “If you have committed this sin, be it with woman, man, or child, I want you to take the time right now and think back to your moments of secret pleasure. As you recall the details, no doubt vividly, you must add one element to the image; you must add to the tableau the presence of our Lord…there with you, knowing your thoughts, watching your deeds…and weeping because of your betrayal.”

Mario’s eyes continued to bore into the eyes of his most ashamed and nervous bishop. As the last words were spoken, the bishop began to sob, immediately attracting the attention of the others around the table. While the others looked upon the man, Mario said, “Richard, as I stand before you, I feel nothing. There is no contempt, no anger, no disgust. I feel nothing because I know with absolute certainty that Elohim has peered deep within you, plumbed the very depths of your heart and soul, and judged you. You will live out the remaining days of your life knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that He has reserved a very special punishment for you, a punishment which will last an eternity.” The defeated bishop did not look down. He continued to allow Bonavente to pierce into his soul through his eyes, as the words impacted like a sledgehammer.

The Cardinal finally released him from his stare and looked around the table. “That is what is in store for not only one man, but for any others within our Church who have fallen, who have decided that their sacred vows made directly to God, our Father, meant nothing.”

Turning back to the silently crying bishop, Bonavente said, “Richard, leave us.”

As the shattered man slowly and unsteadily rose from his chair, Mario said to the group, “And any others? Any among you who now know there are no secrets, only truth?”

Mario saw that there were many whose eyes remained steady and clear, whose posture was held erect. This made him happy and proud. As the denounced bishop slowly walked from the meeting room, three others rose

without comment and followed him out. There was little surprise in the faces of the others.

After the massive doors closed behind the four who departed, Mario continued, “I only have one other comment to make before we leave this most painful topic. All of you must search your own hearts, minds, and souls, looking for knowledge or suspicion which you denied. The betrayal of our Lord, our Church, and our parishioners over the years has not happened without some of us suspecting the truth. For those who suspected and did nothing, do not be satisfied with the inevitability of punishment for those who offended. Your silence allowed for there to be more victims than would have been exploited had you spoken.”

With the import of his last words being absorbed, Mario saw some of the remaining bishops lose a bit of their self-assuredness, some of their pride. “We are all blessed by the privilege of being judged by a forgiving God. The time for confession is now. The time to end the behaviors and the patterns of denial and obfuscation is today. The time is this moment, the time to clear the slate and live each second of the rest of your lives in a fashion which will make you proud to someday stand before Him and receive His judgment.”

Smiling at last, Mario said, “We must begin. We all have much work to do.”

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As the morning line of sunrise continued its traversal around the Earth – the fields, villages, towns, and cities were each seasoned with new arrivals, new yet old. For this day saw the return of the Chosen once passed and now reborn. Some re-embodied souls had departed but days, weeks, or only a few years before. Others, who now returned, came back to touch a soil they had not felt in hundreds or thousands of years.

They all returned to the bodies they had once possessed, yet not the bodies as they had been on the day of their deaths. They were now restored to their prime or, for some, the prime which they had been denied through the cruelty of injury, violence, or disease. The ancient ones returned to a

world absent of a loved one or even an acquaintance among the living. Others, more recently departed, saw this day as a time for reunion – a chance to see and hold those they left behind, a chance to spend a few more hours basking in a love they had sorely missed and offering the same joy to those who mourned their loss.

It was a time for reconnection and reconciliation, a time for clarification, a time for loved ones to speak words which were intended and felt but never spoken while they lived. Some of the reunions were untainted bliss. Others were bittersweet because the departed were to depart yet again, and the still-living subjects of their love did not bear the holy mark and were destined to remain behind.

Those who returned did not bring with them secrets from beyond for they had none to bring. In the time since their deaths, they had been bound to the Earth. Some had borrowed a glimpse of the world through the eyes of the living, but the majority had merely waited for this day. It was a wait without impatience, for they discovered that without a body – a body requiring food, sleep, and stimulation, a body which aged as years passed, a body tuned to the rhythms of the Earth – time meant nothing.

It was a day for sharing only answers taken to the grave, for explaining mysteries they had left unsolved, and for living men and women, who only held childhood memories, to interact as adults with the parents of their parents. It was a gift from God, an added reward to both those who had waited and those who were still alive. It was a reminder of the tapestry of life, the intricate weaving of threads which had produced the individuals as they were, as well as their connection to all others who came before.

As mankind mingled with its own roots under the shell of the gray sky that day, a reaffirmation of history, an internalization of the fact that each person was but an extension of the past, swept across every continent like a global breeze, warming everyone it touched. This reminder caused a transcendence, a rising above the daily and the mundane, offering a perspective long absent. For those who would awake the next morning in their homes, in their own beds, they would find that they had changed. No longer would they be cursed by the petty or distracted by the superficial, for they would have learned that there was a larger scheme, a grander scope for

their existence than they had ever dreamed. The first time for many, they would grasp as a reality the temporary nature of their stay on Earth, followed by the potential for an eternity beyond. The trivial and the temporal, long granted far too much import in their daily lives, would be once again appropriately relegated.

Word of this miraculous return spread among the living as would a wildfire, fueled by the electronic dissemination of the news, made chaotic by the myriad uncertainties. A great number of those alive, learning of the miracle, were instantly filled with the hope of once again seeing a love, long lost. Their urgency sparked a frenzied search, yet they knew not where to look. They were aware that only the Chosen were to return this day. Because of their love or because of their capacity for denial, they believed that their own beloveds would be among this group. For too great a portion of the multitudes, this remarkable day would bring only frustration and a renewed sense of loss and sorrow, brought on by the inescapable conclusion that not only did they not bear the mark, their departed loved ones were also not among the Chosen.

It was a day of emotions ranging from profound disappointment to unbridled joyousness as great minds and great leaders of history, who were among the Chosen, returned. Unencumbered by the ability or the urge to seek out friends or family long ago departed, these men and women – who, in their lifetimes, had changed the world, founded powerful countries, created philosophies, or initiated disciplines – seized the opportunity to view the fruits of their efforts.

For a few, they discovered that an immense and stalwart tree had grown from their seeds, planted and nurtured numerous years ago. For a myriad of others, the evolution of their thoughts, words, writings, and deeds had produced something unrecognizable – a grotesque subversion of their ideal. It was a bitter irony for them to find that their own words, spoken or written many years before, had been twisted in support of ideas, concepts, rules, or laws which were anathema to the archetype. For them, it was to be a day of setting right the wrong, as they spent the precious hours seeking out the current practitioners or obtaining a forum from which they could re-explain the original intent and disavow the appalling reinterpretations. With the

commotion of distractions permeating this day, touching nearly every living person on Earth, they were to find their exhortations falling upon deaf ears. The eager media, enthralled with the munificence of opportunities, dutifully recorded the rantings of Jefferson and Franklin, Gandhi and Lao Tzu, and all of the others. There would be time enough to listen when this day had passed, when the departure was complete.

As many of the living and all of the returned immersed themselves in a revelry of discourse, interaction, and embrace, a darker force coalesced in the hidden recesses of the community of mankind. The dense, gray blanket surrounding the planet seemed to serve as a metaphor for a festering evil, as it honed its stratagem and prepared for the eruption of violent devastation that was to be its gift, wrapped in paper and tied with a bow, for this farewell event.

As was so often the case on Earth, the evil hearts could not suffer the happiness within others. Each smile or laugh, and all of the tears of gladness shed, screamed out a demand for opposition and eradication. Every moment of happiness triggered the urge to expunge it, then to replace it with sorrow, guilt, fear, or dread. Love or friendship would need to be surgically removed, anger or hatred transplanted in its stead. Tranquility would always be shattered by a cacophony of noxiousness, meditation and introspection wiped away by cloying distraction, hopefulness displaced by despair, optimism supplanted by depression, peace and harmony superseded by strife. It was the destiny of the good to build, the obsession of the evil to tear down. On this day of renewal, this time of a rebirth of faith, no positive influence could go unchallenged.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Elohim left his room and walked the corridors until reaching an exit. The guards assigned to protect him did not notice as he walked past. The cameras dedicated to observing his every move did not register the excursion. Leaving the State building, he walked unrecognized and unfettered among the throngs who filled the sidewalks and streets of Washington, D.C., as he made a journey to the Potomac. His countenance was not clouded by the impending turmoil, nor was it brightened by the flood of love coming to him from all corners; it solely reflected the deepness of his thoughts, the gravity of his contemplation.

Reaching the river's edge, bounded by concrete instead of soil, he bent and dipped his fingers into the cool water, feeling the energy of the Earth. Stooped at the man-made bank, apparently lost in thought, he did not acknowledge the phenomenon as the air about him began to shimmer and sparkle, the illumination swirling and growing in intensity until he occupied the epicenter of an island of pure white light. All of the physical objects around Elohim were washed of their color, overwhelmed by the brilliance.

At the moment when the whirlpool of light seemed to match the radiance of the sun, Elohim lifted his fingers from the water and stood to face those around him. Standing closest was Michael the Archangel. The intense blue of his eyes, more than a match for the light which surrounded them like a halo, was the only color visible. The whiteness gradually subsided, returning the river bank to a normal state.

"The time for our journey is near," said Elohim.

"It is," acknowledged Michael.

"He wishes to somehow prevent us. I can feel it."

"I know."

"But we do not know his plan."

"Over the centuries he has learned quite well how to conceal his intent from You."

"From us all."

Elohim looked down, overcome by sadness. “How did this come to be?” he asked Michael.

“Lucifer has been both the corruptor and the corrupted. Before our brother encountered man, he knew no jealousy, no envy, anger, or hatred. Before sharing the first heart and mind, he understood the reasons for his lot. It was only through the lens of man’s perspective that he began to feel wronged. It was that which led him to resentment, a path inevitably leading him to where he is today.”

“The heart of man is truly a double-edged sword,” said Elohim, eyes remaining downcast, “capable of the most magnificent love as well as the most malignant hate.”

Michael, feeling sorrow for his father, replied, “The souls You place within each and all of them, from the moment of birth, are slaves to their whims.”

Closing his eyes and exhaling slowly, Elohim said, “What a price we pay.”

“And what a reward we may reap,” reminded Michael. “The joining of the eternal soul with the living body has been Your greatest miracle.”

“And my most horrendous mistake.”

“Mistake, my Father?” said Michael, concerned. “Would You sacrifice one of the Chosen in exchange for banishing a thousand of the others?”

Elohim, at last, looked up, staring into Michael’s eyes. The angel could see the spark of cheer as his father recalled each of his Chosen.

“You are right. I would not.”

Reaching up, Elohim gripped the shoulders of Michael, feeling his strength. All of the other angels gathered around, each reaching out, each touching, until all were joined together in this most divine contact. Every one of Elohim’s first children shared in his love, his power, and his grace. After minutes, they all released their grips and lowered their arms.

“We must not allow him to stop us this day.”

“I know,” answered Michael, speaking for all of his brothers. “But he is stronger than all of us. For these past thousands of years we have given so much, and he has taken so much. His strength has multiplied as ours has weakened.”

“We must find a way.”

א

The object of their dread, within his host, sat motionless in darkness, engorging himself with the myriad of thoughts, feelings, and sensations of his subjects, those who had allowed or, indeed, invited him in. He closed his eyes, insatiably drinking in the flood. If the torrent which flowed through him had a color, it would be the blackness of pitch. If it had a texture, it would be the viscosity of molasses. If it had an odor, it would be the stench of rot and death, mixed with the acrid bitterness of bile and sulfur. The essence of this raging river of input was uncontaminated by the slightest trace of beauty, of contentment, of any positive emotion.

Despite the enormity of the tidal wave he received, his furor grew as even the smallest contribution to the stream was removed, sidetracked by the blandishments of Elohim or his faithful. Lucifer despised his father and abhorred his never-ending seduction of mankind. His unabated rage was exacerbated by frustration, the frustration born of ignorance, for Lucifer did not know where his father was, nor did he know his plan.

His ability to extend the tendrils of his being into a vast segment of the multitudes allowed him to feel all that was sensed by each, as if it were happening to him. It did not permit him to differentiate the individual sources. Nor did it allow Lucifer to obtain the knowledge each person under his sway possessed. Although connected to millions of eyes, he, in effect, could not see through them. And he, in effect, could not hear through the plentitude of ears. For the input he derived was blended and merged in the channels and rivers which led back to him, intoxicating him with its intensity and mystifying him with its details lost. It was the cacophony of a billion voices all speaking at once, not in the uniformity of a choir, but in the chaotic babble of life, producing only a roar for his ears to hear.

The incessant barrage of sensation was his addiction. Maintaining it, increasing it, magnifying it had become his life’s work and his obsession. No amount was ever enough. Through the ages he had made two discoveries. His first discovery was that the more intense the life experiences of his network, the more vibrant was the flow. A calm, tranquil

life lived by those supplying him was not nearly as satisfying as a life of intensity, strife, and challenge. The second discovery was that he could increase the volume by increasing the number to which he was connected. Without Elohim's gift for seeing all, Lucifer discovered, developed, and nurtured an alternate means for finding those willing to allow him entrance.

It was a long, tedious process, beginning as direct contact with a few. Knowing Elohim would steal them away if they were to his liking, Lucifer had no choice but to lead them down a different path or lose them forever. His first efforts were clumsy and obvious. So overwhelmed by the sensorial gifts which accompanied being human, his behavior had been anything but discreet. Those first possessions, quickly noticed by others, were squelched violently as the loved ones of the possessed sought the aid of priests who cast him out.

Lucifer soon learned the value of discretion, as well as discovering his ability to connect with additional souls. It was with this new discovery that his influence upon the world began to multiply exponentially. What first began as a sampling, a tasting of what each individual had to offer, suddenly became a feast, an embarrassment of riches.

Other than seizing a person for himself, his only connection with mankind was through souls, those foul little creations of his father. Initially, his only use for the souls was as a conduit to men and women, as a means to usurp the product of their existence. Once their hosts died, he had little use for the disenfranchised entities.

However, he soon discovered that each stranded soul, having no hope to ever join the father, remained attached to him – attached but with nothing to offer. As time passed, more of these stranded souls were created. For Lucifer, it was delicious irony. The father created the souls and sent them to Earth to reside within man, with the purpose that this new, symbiotic form would rejoin him. Yet, if they strayed, if they did not live up to his arbitrary standards, he banished them to an eternity of emptiness, as he had banished Lucifer. He first addicted them to the connection with man, then cut them off and allowed them to drift, mindlessly, senselessly, when the body died. Formerly one-half of a whole, they were now drifting and severed entities,

discarded by the one who professed to love them, left with only an unquenchable thirst for what they had lost.

These lonely, yearning souls, still attached to the one who had led them astray, found that they could again touch the world by unseating other souls of the living and newly born. As their count increased through the machinations of Lucifer, through this perverse reincarnation, the number of those who once again tasted life became legion, each fulfilling its learned destiny, each passing through to him that which it again experienced. The process became a feedback loop, a self-perpetuating cycle which grew in scope as would a black hole, sucking ever more into its maw.

א

Reese, having left the Watergate early to spend more time with Elohim, discovered that he was gone. By the time of Reese's arrival at the State Department, a full-blown panic had set in, as the Capitol Police and FBI agents searched for their guest. Lines of nearly fifty people, waiting to enter the building, were delayed as all exits were locked down. Reese decided to try Margo's number, assuming she would answer upon seeing his name on her caller ID. His phone chirped before he could press the first button. Reese saw Margo's name displayed and punched the answer button.

"Margo, what happened?"

"I was calling you to see if *you* knew. We thought you might be with Him."

"No. I'm out front, standing in line. He's not with me."

"I'll send someone down to bring you in."

"No, that's okay. I'll stay out here. Maybe I can look for Him."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I'll just wander, I guess. It'll be better than being cooped up in a room up there."

"All right."

"Margo, by the way, how did He get out?"

"I have no clue. One minute He was…."

Reese interrupted, "You know what, Margo, that was a stupid question. Never mind. I'll call you if I find Him."

“Okay. Good luck. We’ll call you if He shows back up here.”

They broke the connection, and Reese turned to trot down the steps, when he noticed a subtle difference in the demeanor of the people on the street, a change not noticed before. Reese had grown accustomed to a lifetime of indifference from others – a preoccupation and self-indulgence demonstrated by their public behavior. Whether they scurried along talking into their cell phones or simply walked with their eyes downcast, glancing at no one, the norm was a mild state of oblivion, a desire to avoid contact with strangers. It had never ceased to amaze Reese that he could traverse the length of a crowded street and not connect with another person – not a smile or an acknowledgment, not a nod or even a friendly glance from anyone. Sociologists theorized that this was a reaction to our ever more crowded environment, that mankind “cocooned” to maintain space, to create the illusion of privacy. For proof, they cited the rural areas of our country where all were greeted and everyone was engaged in conversation whenever in public.

Reese did not agree. He feared that there was the presence of an underlying antisocial tendency in all. In small towns, to ignore the greetings and friendly solicitations to chat was to risk offense or ostracism, because everyone was known to everyone else. The anonymity of the larger culture had the same effect as the wearing of a mask at a costume ball; it seemed to give the wearer permission to offend. Recalling the first time he watched *The Invisible Man* as a child, Reese remembered the comments of his youthful friends, all boasting what they would do were they invisible. None of their proposed escapades were moral, legal, or ethical; yet, in their minds, all would be acceptable if they were invisible to others.

At that young age, Reese discerned the importance of mutual recognizability as a force to keep most people in check. Enhance it, as in a small town, and people would be on their best behavior, at least while in the public’s eye. Reduce it, as on a crowded street, and people would indulge in acts, mostly minor, that they would not commit in the presence of a friend or an acquaintance. In his mind, Reese extended this theory to the behavioral changes which occurred as the day would end and the night

begin. The cover of darkness, both consciously and subconsciously, masked the identity, enhanced the privacy, and reduced the inhibitions.

Elohim's arrival and the concomitant re-emergence of many articles of faith, Reese realized, had stripped away this illusion of anonymity, causing people to feel as if they were under a bright spotlight of scrutiny which, of course, they were and had always been. The manifestation of this awareness was the change before him. Strangers, as they walked before Reese, were no longer avoiding eye contact with others; they seemed to be seeking it out, glancing from face to face. And as the contact occurred, all smiled, many nodded, some spoke, wishing the other "Good morning." The lack of experience on the part of these born-again civil citizens resulted in what should have been a casual event taking on a bit too much earnestness and intensity.

Observing the transformation as it paraded past, Reese chuckled to himself, silently recollecting the Bill Cosby line, 'These aren't my parents…these are old people trying to get into Heaven!'

He instantly felt harsh for judging the people uncharitably, concluding that for these strangers on the street this morning, all of the smiles and the nods and the friendly greetings would be too little too late. He also noticed, as he stood upon the steps watching, that this was by no means a universal change throughout the crowd passing by. For there were many who met each smile with a curled lip, each nod with indifference, and each greeting with an icy silence. The attempt to engage others revealed, within the population, a vast segment filled with vexation, loathing, and antipathy.

Satisfied that he had gleaned all there was to be learned from this vantage, Reese walked down the steps, turned, and mingled within the throng, smiling and nodding as he progressed.

א

Mohammed Mahmoud nestled the stainless steel canisters on the molded foam rubber in the trunk of his car with exaggerated care, checking and re-tightening the valves on each of the four gleaming tanks for the seventh time this morning. Now was not the time, he thought, to have a

slight leak. He strapped them down and stood back for a moment, examining the trunk before closing the lid. Even though it was early fall, the air was chilly and still. Looking upward, Mohammed again gave a lingering stare to the sky.

"You cannot conceal your deeds from the eyes of Allah, blessed be His name, with mere clouds," he said aloud, comfortable no one was within earshot.

Returning his gaze to Earth, he backtracked to his motel room door, visually sweeping the room once again for any telltale evidence of his identity or intent. So cautious, so detail-oriented was he that he had even taken the bed linens to a nearby Laundromat and cleaned them early this morning. When he returned, Mohammed had unconsciously made up the bed before realizing the suspicion which would be aroused by so uncharacteristic a behavior from a motel guest. Pulling the cover to the foot of the bed, he tugged back the top sheet and rumpled it, also twisting and tossing the pillow. In the process, he noticed the difficulty of staging the appearance of something to look natural. Certain that there was a deep lesson to be learned from this revelation but unable to discern the meaning, he ceased his obsessive crumpling of the linens, concluding that the maid would be too much of a simpleton to notice the nuances of his work. Besides, he realized, it was time for the morning prayer. He had left his prayer rug on the floor, appropriately positioned, and used it once again before rolling it up and taking it to the car.

Mohammed recalled that during his prayer, he had taken additional time to thank Allah for his new benefactor, without whom today's mission of vengeance would not have been possible. Sadly, his cell was rich in passion yet poor in ordnance and other resources. The money and especially the contents of the shining canisters, all so suddenly available, were certainly gifts from God. Not to give thanks for such munificence would be ungrateful and unholy.

As he pulled closed the door to the room, he felt a tingle of excitement and anticipation ripple through his stomach and instantly fought down the sensation. What he needed now, he knew, was a steely coldness, not the flutterings of an over-exuberant schoolboy. For so long, he and the other

faithful within his group had been forced to satisfy themselves with interminable plotting, never the act of implementing. The vigilance of the infidels, their ability to track or freeze the assets of the wealthy faithful, starved his cell and so many other cells of which Mohammed had no knowledge, and yet, he was certain must exist. Without the flow of money, there could be no bombs, no weapons, no vital ancillary items, such as this motel room, which were needed to bring their plans to fruition. He had felt many times that fulfilling the elusive goals of Allah was much akin to attempting to conquer one of the seemingly endless stream of infidel girls who only flirted and never came to your bed.

Today, he knew, would be different. Today, he knew, the seduction was over, and he would consummate at last, although his act on this day would not be the realization of one of his own plots. For not only had the canisters been furnished by the new patron, so had the rental car, the motel reservation and, in fact, the entire plan. This was all fine with him. It was a good plan…actually, it was magnificent. Fishing the keys for the car from his pocket, Mohammed opened the door and climbed in, starting the engine. He carefully pulled out of the parking lot and onto the two-lane highway. As he drove, he pulled from his pocket the cell phone, also given to him by his new friend, pressing and holding down the numeral "1," allowing the pre-entered speed dial to connect him.

א

One of the men who had sat with Kaval only a day before answered his phone. Receiving the report from Mahmoud, he broke the connection. The clipboard in front of him was filled with names. Finding Mahmoud's on the list, he made a check mark. He slowly ran his finger down the list and carefully confirmed that every name on it was marked. After double-checking the list, he turned on a new cell phone and made a call.

א

Suri Kaval lifted the receiver from the phone on his desk, no longer concerned with NSA technicians tracing any of his calls. He was now in a

part of the world which was not a lap dog to the United States and did not cooperate with them. The call was brief and to the point. Ending the conversation, Kaval slowly drew a line through another name on his list. He again counted the names, three already lined out and two remaining, and allowed himself a brief smile.

א

Ricki Darling strode briskly into the Director's office, finding both Bill Burke and Margo Jackson huddled together over his desk. "Burke, Jackson, I've got something."

א

Reese wandered aimlessly, having neither a clue nor a hunch to follow on the whereabouts of Elohim. He found himself standing in front of the statue of the Marines raising the flag over Iwo Jima. This symbol of the conflict between America and Japan, to Reese, somehow seemed an appropriate metaphor for describing the struggle in the world today. Although now transformed into a different people, the Japanese during World War II had descended into acts against their enemy which could only have been described as evil.

Reese recalled reading firsthand accounts of survivors from both the Atlantic and the Pacific battles. The captains and crews of the dreaded German U-boats, with a few exceptions, were noted for surfacing after their torpedoes struck both military and shipping targets, providing food, rafts, water, and a compass to the survivors, sometimes risking their own safety by lingering to do these things as the calls for assistance were answered. The Japanese, whipped into a frenzy of contempt and hatred by their leaders, again with a few exceptions, treated survivors far differently, lacerating the bodies of American sailors with bayonets, tying ropes around them to keep them afloat, dangling them in the water until the sharks arrived, and then laughing as their captives screamed. The unspeakable horror expected by Americans when falling into the hands of the Japanese

caused many, when capture was imminent, to kill themselves at the last moment.

Prompted by his thoughts, Reese found a bench and sat, slipping his ever-present laptop, which he had been using to chronicle Elohim's visit, from its case. After it booted, he opened the word processor and began to type:

The capacity for surprise is determined by context. For one sitting alone in a living room, relaxing and reading a book, the innocuous pop of a heating duct, as it expands due to temperature change, is sufficient to startle. The same, sudden sound in a public restaurant would not be noticed.

During our most recent days, although somewhat prepared by the snippets of information released about incredible healings and other miracles, humanity reacted intensely as Elohim's mark abruptly appeared on the hands of a few; responded strongly as most of its members felt the power of His love course through the very fabric of the planet, touching each of them; were amazed by, yet accepted, the disposition of Lynn Sheffield by an angel, the resurrection of Elohim, and the healing of Bill Burke and my beloved wife, Claire. The news that this was to be Judgment Day, and that it was the third such day in Earth's history, was assimilated with some equanimity. The attacks on the faithful, which at another time would have created outrage and a furor, although received with pain and sorrow, did not produce the expected outcry.

It was this human tendency to adapt quickly and to accept a changing environment that allowed the living to mingle with those long dead on this final day. As was clearly Elohim's plan, explained to me only days ago, the circumstances which have occurred and evolved in the time since His arrival have inured mankind, opening our minds and removing much of our fear. The traumas and the wonders not only have prepared the Chosen for our destiny, they have also prepared those who will remain. Prepared them for a world with new rules and a new reality. A world where the existence of angels, God, Heaven, and souls is no longer a belief but an undeniable fact.

A fact which will alter the essence of politics, social interaction, education, business, science, and existence itself.

The lesson hard-learned by the leaders of man in centuries past, long-ago forgotten or dismissed, was that no citizen, no subject of a crown, not even a slave would follow their commands if the edict was deemed to be contrary to the Word of God. Even those most lacking intelligence have always been capable of calculating the risk and reward inherent in willingly being led down an evil or unjust path. This has been the justification for some of the most heinous acts in our past. How could your God exist, they asked, and allow such unspeakable deeds to occur? They knew the populace could only be coerced into impure actions if their minds and hearts nurtured a wisp of doubt for God or the hereafter, willingly trading the remote possibility of infinity for the reality of temporary safety or gratification. For, so long as there is certainty within, a mere lifetime of imprisonment and torture will be chosen over losing an eternity of bliss.

For many years, the self-proclaimed enlightened within our culture have professed to objectively examine this stubborn artifact called "faith." Bewildered by its resistance to their reason, dumbfounded by its resilience against social pressure, ostracism, and edict, they have concluded that it exists as a symptom of an identifiable flaw within the brains of its victims, a genetic residue of our distant heritage, a mechanism once needed by an ignorant and simple Homo sapiens species and not yet discarded by a frustratingly slow evolution. In their most condescending fashion, they have conceded that there is a segment of the population who may benefit from clinging to these absurd superstitions. Yet they have argued among themselves as to what that benefit might be.

With all of their intelligence, study, and research, they have continued to miss the point, a possibility they would never grant. People believe in God because He exists. Elohim's visit has put that debate to rest. If, despite His presence these days, despite the miracles performed, despite the departure of the Chosen, the enlightened continue to ignore the blindingly brilliant light and resume their search for a logical, empirical, scientific reason for the belief in God, it is provided herein.

A rock-solid certainty of God's existence is the ultimate check-and-balance. No teacher, no parent, no mayor or governor, no president, dictator, or king can ever go too far afield with an abuse of power, not without those below rising up and ending the reign. A failing grade, a six-week grounding, a citation or fine, a jail term or death – these things are all trumped by a knowledge that God is aware of what we do and His judgment is inevitable.

The very nature of the existence of God dilutes the power of the power-hungry at all levels. If a child who is instructed by her parents to lie to Aunt Rose, and tell her they are not home, responds to them by saying, "God says it's wrong to lie," they feel the diminishment of their power. If laws are passed which officially mandate the maltreatment of a minority, and the public refuses, citing God's Word as the reason, the lawmakers feel impotent. If a battlefield commander orders troops to commit atrocities against the enemy, and the troops refuse, citing God's teachings as their authority, the officer feels powerless. If scientists convene a self-appointed panel and, after much deliberation, declare the absence of an ethical conflict in the process of harvesting fetal stem cells, and the public receives their opinion with an indifferent shrug, satisfied that they have already received the final word on the subject, the researchers feel devalued – their authority diminished.

This is the basis for all of the opposition to the belief in God throughout history. Mankind never learned to apply a simple test to the various societal authorities, the test for a conflict of interest. If anyone – any lawmaker, leader, scientist, or parent who urges others to forsake their belief – will gain power should that entreaty be heeded, he or she should be ignored and dismissed, just as a judicious person would dismiss the arguments of a felon wishing to remain free.

This is not to say that members of the clergy do not have a conflict of interest, for they also gain power by increasing the size and scope of their congregations. When Christ walked the Earth, his sermons were not directed toward the building of a ministry; they spoke of an internal belief in His Father and a personal relationship between each person and God. It

was purely the human tendency to congregate with the like-minded which initially created what would become the institutions of Christianity.

Reese stopped typing. Looking around at the milling crowds, he agonized over the message behind his words, not knowing if this journal – this personal recap of the past few days, this recollection of the words of Elohim – would descend after today into obscurity, a mildly interesting tract only read by a few, or would be elevated to the level of a new Gospel. The last thought shook him, disturbing him profoundly. Did Luke or Matthew or Mark or the other Apostles realize, as they committed their own thoughts to paper, that each sentence, each word, most likely written somewhat casually, would be scrutinized for centuries, plumbed for hidden meanings, argued over endlessly by scholars who had dedicated their lives to understanding those words? If the Apostles knew the import and significance of their words, Reese wondered if they could have written them at all.

As one of those who had studied the writings, Reese was painfully aware of the times in history when certain phrases, particular word choices within the Gospels, were seized upon to justify both good and evil acts – phrases which, if the Apostles had the benefit of two thousand years of retrospection, might not be as they would write them today.

"Good grief," he said aloud. "The Gospel according to Saint Reese. I don't think I'll be discussing this concern with Claire." Smiling at his own words, he realized that, by definition, she would be Saint Claire. "That might help a bit," he muttered.

Fighting off the urge to return to the first page of his writings, to meticulously dissect each line for unintended meanings, he assured himself that this was nothing but a journal, a sharing of his experiences with Elohim. It was not a Gospel. Clinging to this thought, he continued typing:

As has obviously been the case in the many years following each of Elohim's past visits, the reaffirmation of His presence will again be gradually eroded, subject to the chiseling and whittling away of this reality by those whose thirst for power over mankind is never slackened or

quenched. Despite the intensity of belief felt by most on this day, His departure will reopen the door to those who seek to weaken His hold. And they shall rush through the portal, headlong, brimming with intensity and patient with the foreknowledge of their inevitable victories.

"*Shall rush through the portal*," Reese said, again to no one but himself. "I don't think I've ever used the word *shall* in my life. I'm starting to write like an Apostle." With this thought, Reese abruptly snapped the laptop closed and rose from the bench, resuming his aimless walk.

א

Hours passed. The sun, unseen through the clouds, moved westward across the sky, insinuating barely a trace of its light down to the Earth. Nowhere did it directly shine. Nowhere, either, did a single drop of rain fall. It was as if all was frozen, locked within a gray resin like a mosquito trapped in amber. Earth, the home of mankind for millions of years, was cut off from the rest of the universe. Isolated and segregated. The dense, misty shell was a curtain behind which the stage was being reset for a new play.

Behind the curtain, as the end of this day drew nearer, life was building to a near frenzy. Hardly a soul was untouched by the commotion, as good-byes were spoken and kissed, passions briefly reignited, scores settled, and minutes prized like years as individuals scurried to complete their goals. Each of the tomorrows would be a day for introspection and reflection, a day to ponder the deeds and choices which caused so many to remain behind. But on this day, with the presence of Elohim palpable, with the fleeting return of the departed evidenced in all directions, and with the final act of the epic play promised to be a miracle, it was a time for immersion, alertness, and awareness.

It was also a time for vengeance – a final opportunity to wreak havoc upon those who would soon be gone, as well as those renewing their vow to return to the path, caught in the midst of a moral and spiritual rejuvenation. For every man, woman, and child who rejoiced at the ramifications of the incipient transformation caused by the arrival of Elohim, there were hordes

who pledged to quash the movement, turning the act of being reborn into a stillbirth. The tempo of their activities also lurched toward a crescendo, not only as plots were put into motion, but in small ways, as well. Petty revenge, thoughtless acts of malice, and vindictive, mean-spirited deeds against those perceived to be favored by Elohim were liberally sprinkled among every group on Earth. They urgently unleashed inner demons as the clock ticked away the countdown, fearing they would run out of time with vitriol yet unspent.

Only Elohim and his angels carried with them an analogue for this moment in time, as the memory of no living being on Earth held, secreted in an unconscious recess, the events of the prior visit. The metamorphosis expanded to encompass every aspect of life. Leaders, powerful only days before, plummeted to the ranks of the erstwhile. Rabbis, priests, and other religious figures, long frustrated by years of their words falling upon deaf ears, found a broader audience with auditory senses restored, paying rapt attention.

Those deigned not fit for an eternity in Heaven, also hungry for a leader, found several candidates who pandered to their resentment and anger. From street corners and soapboxes to the airwaves, the eloquence of discontent spewed from the mouths of a multitude of men and women, coveting the robe of authority. All quoted from the words of Elohim, distorting the intent and corrupting the context, in their attempts to expose him as a harsh and uncaring God, their message easily finding a receptive constituency.

It was, as the verity of human nature would dictate, an inevitable moment of polarization. Only a minute segment of mankind would be immune from the pressure to choose a camp, pick a side, or form an alliance by the waning of this day.

א

Rabbi Leo Schmidt stepped from the train, still unsure as to why he had suddenly left his home in New York and returned to Washington, D.C. Without being aware of the parallel, he also noticed the same changes in human interactions that Reese Johnson had observed earlier in the day. He

was both pleased and disquieted by them as his eyes swept the platform. His time, since his meeting with Elohim and the mind-shattering events on the front steps of the State building, had been divided between his family and his fellow rabbis, endlessly repeating not only the occurrences of that day, but his own feelings and opinions about them. Leo was pleased by the cautious receptiveness of his peers, for he had feared that their reactions would be as his had been when he first heard of Elohim.

Arriving without a case or valise, the Rabbi worked through the crowd toward the exit doors and the taxi stand, hoping enough drivers had decided to work today.

"Leo!"

Schmidt heard his name shouted from behind. Turning, he saw Mario Bonavente, in formal vestment and cap, waving.

"Mario," he answered, stopping to allow him to catch up.

The Cardinal approached, puffing slightly from exertion. "You've come as well, I see."

Smiling and hugging Bonavente, the Rabbi answered, "If I only knew why. Why are you here today?"

Released from the friendly embrace, Mario stepped back and absentmindedly straightened his robe. "I have no clue, my friend."

"Would you join me in a cab ride, Mario?"

"The diocese has a driver waiting in the front. Would you be interested in saving yourself a fare and riding with me?"

"It would be my pleasure. Where are we going?"

"To Elohim, I presume," answered Bonavente.

"Elohim, it is," said Leo with emphasis. The two men resumed walking to the exit.

א

Walter and Doris Penfield climbed into the back of a waiting taxi which was idling at the stand in front of the arrival terminal at Reagan National. The driver, a man whose appearance caused Walter to conclude that he was

of Middle Eastern origin, twisted around on the driver's seat and asked, "Any luggage?" in an accented voice.

Doris replied, "No. None. We're going to the State Department. Do you know that address?"

Smiling, the driver answered, "Yes, lady. I know where it is." He turned back to the front, slapped up the flag on the meter, slid the Crown Victoria into gear, and pulled away from the curb.

As he drove, Walter surreptitiously poked Doris in the side and pointed at the cab's rearview mirror. Hanging from the mirror was a rosary, carved from teak wood, and a St. Christopher's medallion. They exchanged a brief smile.

א

"C'mon, kids. Let's go."

Matthew and Melissa came through the doorway connecting the adjoining suites. "Mom," asked Matthew, "when we get to Heaven, can you stop calling us 'kids'?"

"Of course she will," answered Melissa. "It wouldn't be Heaven for us if she didn't."

Claire smiled at both of them and said, "What if it wouldn't be Heaven for me unless I could?"

Matthew looked slightly crestfallen until Melissa said, "In Heaven, you'll just think you're saying 'kids,' but we'll hear our names. That's how it'll work."

Claire's smile changed to a wry grin. "You're probably right. Are you both ready?"

"Do you mean, were we both able to complete the process of brushing our teeth and dressing ourselves without direct supervision? Yes," said Matthew.

"It's a good thing for you, Matthew, that Elohim doesn't have a problem with sarcasm."

"Dad said He's got a great sense of humor," Matthew replied. "Why are we going to see Him today?"

Claire pursed her lips, hesitating. “I don’t know,” she answered lightly. “I just felt like all of us going. We can spend the day with Daddy.”

ℵ

“Pull over!” Mario abruptly said to the driver.

“What is it?” Leo asked.

“Look. It’s Dr. Johnson.”

Leo’s eyes followed Mario’s outstretched finger, seeing Reese Johnson standing alone at the corner they were approaching. Pressing the button to lower his window, Bonavente leaned out and shouted, “Dr. Johnson!”

Reese’s head turned, apparently startled from his reverie, and he saw the Cardinal. Smiling and waving, he carefully stepped off the curb and dashed through a clear spot in the traffic to the limousine door as Mario flung it open. Bending forward and climbing in, Reese was taken aback when he saw Leo Schmidt sitting on the rear-facing seat.

“What’s the matter, Dr. Johnson? Don’t you like rabbis?” Leo asked jovially.

Momentarily flustered, Reese shook his head, saying, “No. That’s not it. I just didn’t expect you.”

With the door closed, Reese settled into the rear seat next to Bonavente, as the Cardinal, also teasing Reese, said, “Catholics and Jews are allowed to ride in the same car, you know,” laughing.

“Okay! All right! Enough!” Reese responded, with a tone of mock exasperation. “The last I heard, both of you were in New York. Why are you here?”

With an impish grin, Schmidt answered, “God told us to come.”

Reese just looked at him blankly, saying nothing. Bonavente explained, “We don’t know. Both of us had a feeling we should come here to see Elohim today. So we came. We were even on the same train down from New York and didn’t know it until we ran into each other at the station.”

“As I said, God told me to do it.”

Reese, absorbing their words, stared at the carpeted floorboard for a minute before saying, “There are some things neither of you know. I don’t know if this has anything to do with your sudden urge to come here, but… something bad may happen today.”

The smiles immediately left the faces of both men as they sensed the seriousness in Reese’s voice. Leo was the first to speak. “Something bad? Not Elohim?”

“No. I mean not directly, I guess. I really don’t know the details. You know the way He is about sharing His knowledge. He sees it as tampering…intervening. Anyway, it’s supposedly something big, something really big, and something really evil.”

“I thought they had that Stavros character in custody?” said Mario.

“It’s not Stavros. He was just being used. The FBI thinks it’s Suri Kaval. He was behind the other attacks, and they think he’s behind whatever is planned for today.”

“Where is he?” asked Schmidt.

“Out of the country. No one knows where. At least no one is telling me.”

Mario leaned closer to Reese and asked, “You said ‘the FBI thinks.’ Who do you think it is?”

Reese glanced from the Cardinal to the Rabbi, taking a slow breath before answering. “Elohim told me His eternal enemy is involved.”

Leo snorted, abruptly turning his head to look out the side window. Mario dropped heavily back into his seat.

Reese, addressing Schmidt, said, “I know your faith doesn’t embrace the notion of Satan, at least in the same manner as Christianity.”

Leo Schmidt turned back to face Reese and Bonavente. “We do not deny that Satan exists. We disagree as to the nature of this angel and his purpose.”

“I’m afraid I am not as well versed in your faith as is Dr. Johnson, Leo. Could you explain?”

“Of course. The Christians believe that Satan is an angel created by God. On that, we agree. You also believe that he openly disobeyed and

defied our Creator, falling from favor and choosing a life of evil. Am I correct thus far?"

"You are," the Cardinal confirmed.

"To believe such a thing, you must be willing to believe that God can create something which is imperfect. That is a leap taken by Christians which Jews choose not to follow, if you will forgive my chronological sloppiness, since Judaism preceded Christianity by thousands of years. We believe that all which is created by God is as God intended for it to be, including Satan."

"God created Satan to be evil?"

"Yes. He created the dark angel for the sole purpose of tempting man, to test him, to determine his worthiness for Heaven. We call this the 'evil inclination.' It is a force we are all to overcome to reach Heaven."

"I didn't know that," said Mario thoughtfully.

"In my conversations with Elohim," Reese interjected, "this subject has come up many times. Elohim is steadfast in His refusal to intervene on behalf of man when confronted with evil. I've even asked Him, point-blank, why He does not just destroy Lucifer. His answer is that Lucifer is necessary for the testing and evolution of mankind, to create a group fit for Heaven."

"Exactly," said the Rabbi. "The efforts of Satan to lead us off the path to Heaven are not only intended by God, they are designed by Him. This was obvious in the Book of Job, accurately relayed to us in your own King James Version, hardly a version friendly to Jews. In the first chapter, Satan along with several other angels appeared before God and questioned Job's faithfulness, claiming that he would not withstand horrible pain and utter destitution. Satan asked God's permission to test Job. The request was granted, but He meticulously outlined for Satan what he might and might not do when putting Job to the test. The instructions were carefully followed by Satan. As we all know, Job struggled at first, even contemplated suicide, but by the end, his virtue prevailed over Satan's carefully orchestrated torment. That has been the purpose God intended for Satan since the beginning of time. And Satan, His loyal and obedient

servant, has complied. In fact, the word *satan*, in Hebrew, means 'hinderer.'"

"Fascinating," said Bonavente, sincerely interested in this new perspective. To Reese, he asked, "How does this description of Satan reconcile with what Elohim has said?"

"There are several intriguing parallels." Reese went on to relay Elohim's description of the creation of Lucifer, the reality of the energy polarization with its toxic effects upon the others, His placement of Lucifer on Earth, and Lucifer's discovery of his ability to possess a single person and connect to a multitude of others. He ended the narrative by saying, "What is interesting about all of this is that it seems to combine the description of Satan in Judaism with the Christian definition of the devil."

"How so?" asked Schmidt.

"Elohim created Lucifer as a perfect being. There was nothing evil or imperfect about him. If all of the other angels had been created from the same end of the energy spectrum, so to speak, Lucifer would have been invited to remain in Heaven and would have thrived. It was a fluke, an unintended consequence of the laws of physics, that this was not to be the case."

"But my own image of the Almighty is that He could not make such a mistake," objected Leo.

Reese groped for a response as he glanced out the side window. He noticed a man in the anachronistic attire of the American colonies, standing on the sidewalk and staring, bewildered at the various sights around him. His view of the man was suddenly blocked by a taxi, coming to a stop next to them. As he began to look away, Reese recognized Walter Penfield in the cab.

"Mario, have your driver honk, please," he said as he pressed the button to lower the window.

The driver, hearing the request, tapped his horn twice, causing Penfield to look in their direction, spotting Reese immediately. Before the cab could proceed through the intersection, Reese saw Penfield hastily hand some money to the driver. He and a woman Reese did not recognize got out of the

taxi in the middle of the street and climbed into the now open door of the limousine.

"It appears we are having a bit of a reunion," Penfield said. As he and the woman settled into open spaces, he continued, "Gentleman, I'd like to introduce my wife, Doris. Doris, this is Reese Johnson. Please don't call him Professor, Mister, or Doctor. This is Cardinal Mario Bonavente, and this is Rabbi Leo Schmidt."

After everyone had greeted Doris, Walter asked, "Do any of you have an idea why we're all participating in this homecoming?"

They all shook their heads, except Reese, who answered, "I have a feeling we've been called…by Elohim. But I don't know why."

"It's not like you, Reese," Penfield said, "from the brief time we've spent together, for you not to have a theory."

Reese smiled. "Thank you, I think. As a matter of fact, I do; I just have a feeling it's a little half-baked."

"We'll be the judges of that," said Bonavente. "Please share it."

Reese filled in the portion of his narrative previously left out, explaining to the group that Elohim had requested his opinion on a course of action. When he finished, Leo said, "Again, not exactly consistent with the all-knowing Almighty I've held so dear."

"Well, I think that's kind of the point. I mean, that's where I was heading, mentally, when I spotted Walter and Doris. Elohim describes Himself as, originally, a pure energy being – somehow sentient, somehow able to affect the energy around Him or within Him. I don't know. Maybe, in the beginning, His being was the total of all of the energy there was. We've never really gotten into the specifics. Anyway, He altered a portion of the energy, His energy, and created matter, made the universe."

Turning to address Penfield, he said, "Walter, the way He explains it, energy and matter are two sides of the same coin."

"Phase states," answered Penfield.

"Pardon?" said Mario.

"The best way to describe it would be to use water as an analogy. The molecule we know as water can be a gas – steam, a liquid – water, and a solid – ice. The three states are merely phases of the same material. In this

particular case, the phase-state transitions occur as a result of temperature variations, complicated by pressure, but that's not important. In my chats with Elohim, He discussed the energy/matter interrelationship, and it makes sense. It was alluded to by Einstein. Except the influence which causes the phase transition is velocity, with the critical point being the speed of light or maybe time. They're sort of interrelated."

"Thanks for clearing that up," said Bonavente sarcastically.

Penfield chuckled. "Sorry, but this is not only fairly advanced physics, some of it is new to me, as well. Over the past few days, I've felt like a caveman being handed a laser. The deal is, it's all plausible, I guess, for there to have been only energy in the beginning, as it were. It's also plausible for Elohim to have been that energy, when you look at it from the same perspective as the group within physics who espouse the anthropic principle."

"Which is?" asked Schmidt.

Reese, answering him, said, "It's basically the perspective that we shouldn't puzzle over the mystery of the million flukes and coincidences that must have occurred to allow us to come into existence…because we do exist. If we didn't exist, that would mean the flukes hadn't happened, but we wouldn't be here to notice. Since we are here, we should just accept the flukes and move on. Kind of like not agonizing over the odds of winning the lottery, if you're the winner."

"That's a good description," added Penfield. "Except, rather than an anthropic principle, we are talking about a…what…a 'deitropic' one. He, Elohim, simply is. Therefore, the bizarre chain of events, which had to have happened for Him to *be*, must have happened. Calling Elohim energy, matter, God, or whatever else is purely semantics and impossible to assimilate without indulging in the human tenancy to anthropomorphize Him."

"Well, that's just it, Walter. We didn't turn Him into a man so that we could relate to Him. According to Elohim, after setting the chain of events into motion which eventually resulted in mankind, He also chose to assume the form."

Penfield rubbed his face vigorously, a habit Reese had observed in the interview room more than once, before he said, “Wow. No offense intended toward my fellow humans, but why would He do that?”

“To be close to us. And also to enjoy the sensory aspect of humanness. Again, it’s a weird concept, but Elohim, just like every other living being, wanted to reproduce. For us to reproduce, it’s easy. We borrow from the environment, by eating, drinking, breathing, absorbing sunlight, et cetera. When we produce a child, it is an amalgamation of all of those materials, created from the template of its mother and father. The dilemma for Elohim was that He was already everything. There was nothing external to Him for Him to borrow in satisfaction of His urge to have children.

“At the stage when He was still pure energy, He created the angels, basically by splitting off pieces of Himself, but utlizing only positive energy. He soon discovered that interacting with them was like talking to a mirror. He realized that if He was to create a distinct being, it must somehow be not only separate but different from Him. He then created Lucifer. Rather than splitting off a small, positively charged piece of Himself, He distilled a new discreet portion of His energy, creating an entity with only a negative charge, rather than the balanced charge He possessed. Unfortunately, this new being, by its very existence, was physically dangerous to the other angels.”

“He would be,” Penfield said. “Annihilation would result.”

“He wanted a being, someone, something, who could interest Him, surprise Him. It was then that He created the physical universe, including Earth, mostly as an experiment. Leo, this is where I think I get close to answering your earlier questions. He toyed with Earth, experimenting, changing things, sometimes dumping the whole game over and starting again. Most of this is supported by the fossil record with several unexplained mass extinctions. He experimented and watched, rather than simply creating, not because He couldn’t, but because He didn’t want to know the outcome in advance. Finally, the first man walked the Earth, springing into existence as a result of the trillions of random mutations set in motion by Elohim.

“Just as He had patiently waited for a sign from all of the earlier creatures, a sign of that which He so urgently wanted in a separate being – free will, He watched early man. His patience was eventually rewarded by a man who surprised Him, who zigged rather than the zag Elohim expected, who showed the first indications of free will, that most prized of traits celebrated in Judaism.”

Leo nodded.

“Then, just as practitioners of animal husbandry do today, He gently segregated and encouraged this lineage, until He had created an entire race of free-willed people. To further perfect His new creation, Elohim split off small pieces of His energy, implanting them, one by one, into these free-thinking humans.”

“Souls!” exclaimed Bonavente.

“Yes. We call them souls. He saw them as His children, even though each soul was identical to all others. It was a perfect union. The soul elevated mankind, connected humans with the broader force of the universe. Mankind enhanced the souls by sharing its ability of free will, as well as by allowing the soul to partake in the feast of senses inherent in being human. Each touched, affected, and changed the other.”

“In other words, the souls gave mankind connectedness, and mankind gave the souls individuality,” said Penfield.

“Yes. And to protect His angels from accidental contact, He brought Lucifer with Him to Earth. It was here that Lucifer discovered an ability to experience life and human senses by occupying or connecting with mankind. In some cases, he supplanted the God-given soul, and in other cases, he developed a connection between himself and many others. He, too, was changed by the contact. Before that time, he was Elohim’s loving creation, pure and loyal. The human traits of envy, resentment, and hatred were some of the lessons he learned from us, causing him to conclude for the first time that he had gotten a raw deal from Elohim. All of his brothers, the other angels, were allowed to be together in Heaven, while he was banished. From the new perspective as a human, he began to despise his Father. These feelings grew in intensity until he became the malignant force he is today. As the years have passed, and Elohim has continued to skim off

the cream of mankind for Heaven, the remaining souls, contaminated and corrupted by Lucifer, have remained…stranded, their number growing exponentially to the point where we are now essentially overwhelmed by the 'evil inclination,' as your faith, Leo, describes Satan's influence.

"Elohim, by His own choice, could not have anticipated this outcome, any more than a scientist who blindfolded himself and randomly mixed an unknown collection of chemicals could predict the final product. He still loves Lucifer, as any father would love his child, even a child who has gone astray. And He is also faced with the reality that Lucifer himself, in his purest form, is the most fundamental unit in the universe and therefore cannot be eliminated by further reduction. Because of these factors, Elohim fears that this may be His final visit…that since the balance between good and evil is so lopsided, mankind is on the verge of an unstoppable plunge into the abyss.

"There is also an additional consideration, admitted by Elohim. He, too, has been changed by His immersion into humanness. He has become more ambivalent, I believe. In a nutshell, that's the quandary Elohim is facing today, the topic on which He has asked my advice."

Everyone in the car was silent, mulling over the implications of Reese's words. At last, Doris, who had not spoken since the introductions, said, "Well, I guess that explains why we were all brought here."

א

Margo, casually flopped into one of the chairs in the borrowed office she and Burke were using, stood abruptly.

"What is it, Margo?" asked Bill.

"I need some fresh air. I think I'll take a walk."

"We're not getting anywhere here. Mind if I join you?"

"No. Come on."

He followed her out to the hallway, and they walked silently to the elevator. Burke touched the down button, and a moment later the doors opened. The sole occupant was Craig McWilliams. "Going down?" he asked, smiling.

"In more ways than one," answered Margo sardonically.

They entered the elevator. The light surrounding the L button was already lit, and the car began its descent. Before reaching the main floor, it eased to another stop, the doors opening to reveal Nicholas Reynolds, standing alone and waiting.

"This is a little strange. What are you doing here?" Burke asked.

As Reynolds stepped in, he answered, "I was double-checking the security tapes from this morning."

"Still no Elohim?"

"Nope. He was in His room, then He was gone. None of the views from any of the cameras showed Him leaving."

"Well, we saw during the interviews that He doesn't have any problem not being recorded," commented McWilliams.

"True," agreed Margo.

Reaching the lobby, the elevator doors slid open. They all expected someone else to be standing in front of the doors, but no one was there.

"Where are we going?" Nicholas asked, following his bosses to the exit doors.

"Don't know," answered Burke.

"A walk," said Margo.

"Sounds good to me," replied McWilliams. "Hey, I heard Abe Lincoln is over at the Memorial."

No one responded as they left the State building and continued to walk out into the dim grayness of the late afternoon.

"What the heck?" said Reynolds.

"What is it?" asked Margo, alerted.

"Why is the Johnson detail here?"

They all saw the black sedan parked at the bottom of the steps. Two FBI agents, who had been assigned to watch over Claire Johnson as well as Melissa and Matthew, were both leaning against the front fender.

Nicholas trotted down the remainder of the steps and started to ask the two men why they were off their watch, when he heard a female voice yell, "Nicholas!"

Turning, he saw Melissa running toward him. Standing behind her were Claire and Matthew. He met Melissa as she ran into his outstretched arms, nearly knocking him over. Bill Burke, having caught up with Reynolds, said under his breath, “She’s a little young for you, isn’t she?”

Blushing, Reynolds said, “You caught me. This is my girl.”

Hearing his words, Melissa hugged him even more tightly.

Margo, joining Burke at the bottom step, said, “You were right. This is getting strange.”

Just then a black limousine pulled to the curb behind the FBI sedan. Astonished, they watched as Reese, Mario, Leo, and Walter and Doris Penfield emerged from the back door.

א

Clayton Dean was halfway through reading the third briefing paper on his desk. He felt his neck muscles tightening as a result of the constant, fixed position, when he heard a soft knock on his office door.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Preston Bennett, looking tired and a little sheepish, entered the room with noticeably less energy than he usually displayed. Clayton, putting the briefing aside, looked over his subordinate and friend from top to bottom and said, “How are you holding up?”

“Been better.” His fatigue was audible. “I just wish they’d let me talk to Debbie.”

Concerned, Dean asked, “They won’t? Why not?”

“They say it’s normal, part of the investigation, but they won’t explain it.”

“Want me to see what I can do?”

“No. That’s all right. They’ve let me see her…through the glass, you know.” Preston’s eyes clouded as he recalled the scene. “They wouldn’t turn on the speaker, so I couldn’t hear her, but she looked bad.”

Both men briefly lapsed into an awkward silence, broken by Preston. “I still can’t believe it. Spying on me, for Pete’s sake!”

“Has she said why?”

“I don’t know. They told me she did it for ‘idealistic’ motives, whatever the hell that means.”

Dean stared at Bennett, trying to find the right words. “Why don’t you take some time off?”

“I don’t know. Thanks, though. Right now, working…or trying to… feels a little better.”

א

Reese and Claire stood off to the side, watching, as the ad hoc gathering milled on the sidewalk. “Reese, do you know what’s going on?”

“You mean, why are we all here? Yes and no. After Cardinal Bonavente and Rabbi Schmidt picked me up and then we found Walter and Doris, we all talked about Elohim and Lucifer.”

“You mean, *you* talked.”

Laughing, Reese answered, “Yes. I did most of the talking. Anyway, I told them He asked for my advice.” Seeing the look on Claire’s face, Reese held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “Before you say anything, it just came up. It was a natural progression of the facts.”

Claire smirked. “You just had to tell them all.”

“Come on, give me a break. It made sense to share it if we were all going to brainstorm.” Before she could comment, he continued, “So I laid it out, shortened of course, and Doris, Walter’s wife, said that was why we were all being brought together – to help solve His problem. I think it makes sense.”

Claire stared at the rest of the group. Schmidt and McWilliams were standing together, laughing about something. Margo, Bill, and Nicholas formed another small group. She noticed Melissa standing close to Reynolds, with Matthew a foot or two behind her. Since the elevator incident, their sweet son had appointed himself as her bodyguard, backed up, of course, by the two, ever-present FBI agents.

“So, what do we do?” Claire asked. “Right now it looks like we’re all waiting for a bus.”

“I think we need to be someplace where we can all talk as a group.”

“Why not inside? I’m sure the State Department has a conference room we could use….”

“Because Craig, Nicholas, Margo, and Bill all felt the urge to come outside. No, I think we’re supposed to be out here for some reason.”

“Why doesn’t Elohim just tell us what He wants us to do?”

“He’s probably otherwise engaged at the moment.”

Looking around, Reese spotted a covered alcove to the side of the main entrance, probably intended as a public shelter on days with nasty weather. Pointing it out to Claire, he rejoined the others, suggesting they all move to the alcove. All in agreement, they re-climbed the steps, except for Reynolds who consulted with the two-man protective detail, instructing them to keep an eye on the group and keep strangers away.

The two agents repositioned themselves halfway up the steps, with their backs to the group, as Reynolds came up.

Looking at Reese, McWilliams asked, “Okay, you called this meeting. Now what?”

“Actually, I don’t think I called it.”

Margo said, “It’s like we all got the memo, but the guy who sent it hasn’t shown up yet.”

“Look,” Reese responded, “I’ve spent more time with Elohim than anyone else. I think I’ve gotten a decent peek at how He works. From Creation itself, all the way through to today, His modus operandi is to put all of the ingredients together and then let the desired result just happen.”

“We’re the ingredients?” asked Leo.

“I think so. We need to assume, for a moment, that everything that has happened since you and Mario stepped off the train has been planned – not only, and I think this is important, not only that we ended up together, but every detail leading up to it.”

The gathering, one by one, sat on the stone benches lining the alcove, except for Reese who remained standing. Turning to the Cardinal, he asked, “What did you and Leo discuss before picking me up?”

“Nothing of any import. It was only a minute or two before we saw you, and we had only discussed the oddness of our mutual arrivals.” Leo nodded.

“So,” Reese continued, “the conversation didn’t really begin until I was in the car. I was just wandering aimlessly until you saw me and picked me up. Let’s assume for a moment that Elohim wanted you both to hear what I had to say. Now, almost immediately, we began to discuss….”

“That God was directing our day, something evil was impending, and Satan…,” supplied Schmidt.

“Satan!” exclaimed Matthew.

Reese, responding to his son, said, “Yes, Lucifer. Elohim is afraid he is behind something which is about to happen today.” Other than the wideness of his eyes, Matthew appeared to accept his father’s answer. Reese resumed, “That’s a good recollection, Leo. You shared your perspective on Satan, and I, mine. We were talking about how God could create an imperfect being. I was struggling with the physics Elohim had explained to me, in an attempt to clarify my point, and we had reached something of an impasse. At that precise moment, who shows up but a physicist?”

Leo raised one eyebrow and dipped his head to the side as an acknowledgment. “This is true,” he said. “I’m still not certain you’ve convinced me, but it makes a certain sense.”

Reese, becoming slightly excited, said, “But, Leo, I think that’s the point. I was trying to convince you and I’m given Walter to help me.”

“It’s important to Elohim that I believe this? Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think I do,” said Bonavente. Everyone’s attention turned to the Cardinal as he, sitting next to Schmidt, reached over and lifted Leo’s right hand, exposing the mark. Gazing directly into Leo’s eyes, he asked in a gentle voice, “Leo, you’re not going, are you?”

Leo Schmidt, looking toward the street, briefly watched the lengthening shadows of the setting sun before answering, “No. I’ve decided to stay.”

Doris Penfield gasped. Melissa, stunned, asked, “Why?”

Addressing her, Leo said, “Either by design or by a twist of fate, I am the only Jew who has met with Elohim. His presence here on Earth and the circumstances surrounding His arrival run counter to the teachings and beliefs of Judaism and our prophets. Although my discussions with Him and the events following my meeting with Him have not caused me to reject

my faith, they have led me to the conviction that there are some minor misinterpretations within our beliefs…misinterpretations which have resulted in Jews closing their eyes to certain realities."

Shifting his attention to Craig McWilliams, Leo continued, "Craig, as we first met, I told you it was impossible for Elohim to be God. Do you recall your question to me?"

Craig nodded and said, "It was a little rude."

"Its tone was warranted, and the message was quite piercing, especially in retrospect." Explaining to all of the others, he said, "Without my benefitting from even the courtesy of a brief meeting with Elohim, I stood before those who had met Him and accused Him of being a charlatan. In response to my rudeness, Craig asked me if the only way I could accept that God had come down to Earth was if He was in compliance with my terms."

A slight smile played across the Rabbi's face. "In the time since that question was asked of me, I have had ample opportunity to reflect upon its import. Other than the inherent arrogance of my position, which is the position of my faith, I have found an inconsistency which I cannot ignore. The most basic tenet of Judaism is that man possesses free will. It is free will which sets us apart from the angels as well as the beasts. In my car ride today, I learned from Reese that free will was the sought-after goal of Elohim during Creation.

"As I listened, I came to understand the logic. Free will cannot be directly created, no more than a computer programmer can write a piece of software which will perform a function he did not instill within it. I heard Reese relay the agony suffered by Elohim as He found that His beloved angels did not possess free will; the frustration of creating Lucifer, only to find that His own beloved child was toxic to his brothers and their very environment; the patient and tedious wait as Elohim allowed the random and mysterious process, mysterious even to Him, to create man. When man arrived, Elohim found a being, granted of His own creation, who possessed free will. This cornerstone of Judaism…so important to Elohim…free will was conveyed to Jews through the prophets. And its significance is, according to our teachings, never to be underestimated.

"However, somewhere along the way, in our ardor to be faithful to God and the word of the prophets, we have failed to ascribe the same ability, the same gift, to Him. There are many stories within our faith of good men, holy men, who set out on a certain path. And due to the exigencies of life, of reality, they were forced to change their course, not the least of these men being Moses. The fact that he changed his course, changed his mind, does not make him less holy, less righteous.

"Elohim, either possessing the trait innately, or acquiring it through His immersion into our humanity, obviously possesses free will. Looked at from my newfound perspective, I cannot imagine a God who would not. And with free will comes the possibility of change, of a different path taken. I have come to understand that a promise not kept – because not keeping it is the wise choice – is not a promise broken. A word given and not followed – resulting from unforeseen events which occur on Earth because we all possess free will – is not a lie."

The gathering was still, listening intently to Leo's words. "Jews believe that Satan is an agent of God. God's creations cannot be imperfect, and so therefore, Satan's deeds must be intended by the Almighty as a test we must pass. Elohim has explained to Reese that Lucifer was, at first, a pure and loving being. It was his connection…his surrender to the frailties and pettiness of man…which caused him to become evil. Before this marriage between Lucifer and the flesh, he was loyal to his Father, as has been the belief of my faith.

"There has been much I have heard in these days which has confirmed the teachings of my faith. And so much that differs. Yet, much of that which differs, upon close examination, either passes the test of reason or can be discounted as merely semantics. It has been the history of Jews to cling steadfastly to our beliefs, many times at our own great risk…so steadfastly that they have become ingrained, hard-wired, and inflexible. The benefit of this tendency is the instilling of an inner strength which has seen us through many travails. The flaw is an inclination to close our eyes to anything not" – Leo paused and smiled at Craig – "'complying with our terms.'

"I don't know if Jesus Christ was who Christians believe Him to have been. I know Elohim explained that He was. But I will say that if He was

the true Son of God, Jews missed a wonderful opportunity. My stubbornness nearly caused me to miss the same opportunity just a few days ago.

"These are all thoughts which must be shared with my fellow rabbis, all arguments which must be passionately and fervently made in the years to come. If they are not, we Jews have far too much to lose." Leo paused, smiled again, and asked, "And who, other than I, can do this? As I said, I am the only Jew to have met Him, the only one to have learned these lessons. I know my brethren well enough to know that if I leave a written tract for them, their discipline, their training, and the sheer weight of our history will cause the pages to be figuratively torn to sheds. Nothing will change.

"I don't know if change will occur if I remain. I do know that if I go with you tonight, it will not. I cannot do that to my people."

The long silence, following his words, was broken by Mario who said, "I understand, my friend. It is also the decision of the Pope to remain."

"There is one more issue," Reese told the Rabbi, "maybe an important one. The time following the departure is going to be filled with tremendous conflict promulgated by Lucifer. I think Elohim wanted you to have a better understanding of the enemy in the days to come."

Leo Schmidt nodded and said nothing.

Margo asked, "What you've said explains why all of you were brought together for the ride here, but what about the rest of us? Claire, Matthew, Melissa, Bill, and me?"

"To be at my side."

Startled, all heads turned to see Elohim, standing with Michael the Archangel at the mouth of the alcove.

"I've said it before…I really wish You would stop doing that!" said Reynolds.

Elohim smiled at him and walked to the center of the group, leaving Michael, framed by the last of the dim sunlight filtering through the clouds, to stand at the entrance. Reese squeezed onto the bench between Claire and Matthew, leaving the floor open for Elohim.

Before Elohim began to speak, Matthew leaned toward his father and whispered, “Dad, count.”

Confused, Reese asked him, “Count? Count what?”

“Us.” Rolling his eyes, he added, “I can’t believe you missed this,” obviously proud of himself for besting his father.

Reese looked around the gathering and began a quick head count, murmuring under his breath, “Matthew, me, Claire, Mario, Leo, Bill, Margo, Craig, Walter, Doris, Nicholas, and Melissa. Twelve!”

The last word, spoken louder, caused everyone to turn to him. Elohim, also hearing the sum, acknowledged, “Yes, there are twelve of you here.”

Mario Bonavente sucked in a gulp of air. Reynolds, under his breath, said, “I’ll be….”

Reese looked at his wife who returned the look; a content smile played across her face. His son and daughter were enraptured, staring at Elohim with anticipation.

Melissa asked, “Are we the Apostles?”

Elohim answered, “In a sense, yes, you are. The number also holds much significance.”

“*Twelve* months in a year,” supplied Reese. “The *twelve* signs of the Zodiac.”

“The *Twelve* Tribes of Israel,” added Leo.

“*And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the Twelve Tribes of the Children of Israel*. Revelation 21:12,” said Bonavente.

“*Twelve* pops up everywhere,” said Claire, “in mythology, religion, astrology, music, the legal system, and medieval history. *Twelve* hours on a clock face. *Twelve* labors of Hercules. The Knights of the Round Table had *twelve* basic rules of conduct. Alcoholics Anonymous has *twelve* steps and *twelve* traditions. High school graduates have *twelve* years of education. There are *twelve* tones in the standard musical scale.”

Doris Penfield joined the discussion. “Square root three-based geometry is the geometry of minerals, crystals, snowflakes, et cetera. Square root five-based geometry relates to pentagonally-based biological life. The *dodecahedron*, the only polyhedron composed entirely of pentagons,

contains conversion triangles with a relation between square root three and square root five mathematically, normally thought to be entirely incompatible. It is considered, by some, to be the mathematical bridge between the imprecise construction of biologically-based life, and minerals, rocks, crystals, snowflakes, et cetera, which are based upon the perfection of square root three geometry."

"You've been living with Walter too long," joked Reynolds.

"Why do you think I married her?"

Reese said, "Plato regarded the five perfectly symmetrical solids as the basic building blocks of the world. A dodecahedron is one of only five three-dimensional solids which are perfectly symmetrical arrangements of a set of non-planar points in space. The best known of these five so-called 'Platonic Solids' is the six-sided hexahedron, the cube, which has twelve edges, or lines. Three of the polyhedra have triangular faces: the four-sided tetrahedron, the eight-sided octahedron, and the twenty-sided icosahedron. The dodecahedron has twelve pentagonal-shaped faces, the pentagonal shape having its own significance in myth and lore. The tetrahedron is associated with plasma or fire, the hexahedron with solid or the Earth, the octahedron with gas or the air, and the icosahedron with liquid or water. He identified the dodecahedron, the quintessence or 'fifth element' with the universe itself, writing that 'God used this solid for the whole universe, embroidering figures on it.'"

Leo contributed, "*Twelve* is throughout the Old Testament: the *twelve* sons of Jacob, the *twelve* princes of the Children of Israel, the *twelve* running springs in Helim, the *twelve* stones in Aaron's breastplate, the *twelve* loaves of the shewbread, the *twelve* spies sent by Moses, the *twelve* stones which made the altar, the *twelve* stones taken out of Jordan, the *twelve* oxen which bore the brazen sea."

Cardinal Bonavente added, "Also in the New Testament, with the *twelve* stars in the bride's crown, the *twelve* foundations of Jerusalem which John saw, and her *twelve* gates."

"In India, the number *twelve* signifies water, or the lack of it," said Craig.

"It is considered to be the number of perfect governance," said Bill.

“Study the dodecahedron,” continued Doris, “and you’ll see there is also a conversion triangle for square root two-based mathematics. Basically, it mathematically provides a direct geometric link between the geometry of crystals, minerals, et cetera, and biological life. Most life forms are designed in a lattice structure, either cubic or hexagonal – square root two and square root three geometry. You’ll also find the hexagonal structure in organic compounds like the benzene ring and even in human DNA, along with the pentagon.

“Following this route, the hexagon-interlocking tetrahedron and the equilateral-triangle tetrahedron are the first figures which can be constructed. After that is the square – cube. As long as you stick within this geometry, you have a perfect universe of harmony, where everything can be predicted and everything is known. It spreads out to the infinitely large or shrinks infinitely small, and remains true. The basis is known from the very beginning, and any time you want you can go to the point of origin and back out the other side.

“But this geometry is static and rigid. There is no dynamic tension within it. It’s stable with nothing exciting. If you look at it under an electron microscope, you see a perfect matrix of atomic structure. Now add the ‘division in extreme and mean ratio,’ the relationship between square root two, square root three, and square root five in the dodecahedron – and things get interesting. It’s also a flawless division, in perfect harmony, with not even the tiniest particle left over to cause ‘noise.’ The problem is, this division cannot be attained in the physical universe because it has no origin point, no starting point! It can only be approximated in nature by the Fibonacci Sequence.”

Beginning to show excitement in her voice, she continued, “But the payoff is that life based upon the ‘division in extreme and mean ratio’ is vibrant, impetuous, and exhilarating. Because it cannot attain the perfection it is conceptually based on, pentagonally-based life constantly strives for this impossible dream. Mathematically, it is always searching for its origins, for the truth about itself. This is the basic impulse, geometrically, of creativity.”

“And I always thought geometry was boring,” said Melissa, touched by Doris Penfield’s passion.

“It sounds like a numerical representation of Elohim’s struggle to create free will and mankind’s struggle for perfection,” added Reese.

“As I said, an auspicious number,” said Elohim. “Many of the allusions to the number twelve resulted from the symmetry of the energy field created in multiples of twelve, a fact more sensed than understood throughout history. The convergence of a lesser or a greater number of energy sources is merely the sum of its parts. When twelve beings, filled with energy, come together to combine their power, a resonance occurs, reinforcing and amplifying the energy to a far greater level than its sum.”

Margo asked, “Is that why Satan lured Judas, to break the group of twelve?”

Elohim smiled at her and answered, “It is. The difference in magnitude of energy between a group of eleven and a group of twelve is a thousandfold. Diminishing that influence, on the eve of my Son’s departure, was paramount to Lucifer.”

“Does this mean,” asked Matthew, “that if we’re your Apostles, we have to stay here instead of going to Heaven?”

Favoring Reese and Claire’s son with a broad smile, Elohim answered, “No, Matthew. You are to depart with me this evening, as are all of you.” Glancing at Leo, Elohim added, “All who choose to go. When I agreed that, in a sense, you were my Apostles, I was merely suggesting that each of you has had a role, for the most part fulfilled during these past few days. Reese…you have set down, in written form, our conversations, as well as my dialogues with the others, for all to read in the years ahead. Rabbi, you have already begun your work with your friends and colleagues. Bill, Margo, Nicholas, and Craig, you have valiantly fought to preserve the safety of this group, as well as all of my children, during this time. Walter, since we spoke, you and Doris have planted many seeds in the minds of your fellow scientists, seeds which shall grow and blossom as time progresses. Cardinal, in the days since my Son walked this Earth, your Church has drifted the smallest bit from His path. You have initiated the changes He desires.”

Claire began to speak. Elohim, raised his hand to stop her, saying, “I know you are wondering what your contribution has been.” Her expression showed her agreement. “Your husband’s love for you and his respect for your intelligence and intuition are as profound as any I have ever witnessed. Despite his own intellect, regardless of the clarity of evidence he may find, Reese will not reach a significant conclusion or make a momentous decision without the benefit of your wisdom. This is so true that you have both become one. The legacy of Reese’s journal contains not only a faithful description of events, but it is imbued with a deep and fresh philosophy which will affect the lives of millions. That philosophy is a product of the oneness you share and is as much a reflection of your insights and beliefs as it is his.”

Claire, touched by Elohim’s words, felt a tear drift lazily down her cheek. Wiping it away, she asked, “Matthew and Melissa. What…?”

Elohim, anticipating her question, said, “Our moment of departure is not yet at hand.”

“In other words, the day isn’t over,” Claire surmised, a tinge of worry touching her face.

The last of the feeble sunlight, weary of struggling to penetrate the blanket of clouds, surrendered to the advancing twilight, achieving a near total darkening of the alcove. The timers controlling the exterior lighting, unprepared for the prematurity of nightfall, did not switch on.

Walter Penfield asked, “I understand the roles we’ve all played recently. What is the reason for assembling this evening? Does it have to do with the power you described?”

“It does,” replied Elohim.

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Mahmoud made the course adjustment gently. As the Cessna settled into its new direction, he activated the autopilot and released the yoke, trying to relax by visualizing the others in numbers unknown to him, maneuvering toward their targets in the darkening sky.

א

Suri Kaval stared through the window at the indigo blackness of the night. There was nothing more for him to do. All of the names on the list were lined out, signifying that the mobilization was complete; the loyal and the recruited agents of death were en route. His mind labored to visualize the new world that tomorrow would bring. He knew the anticipation and excitement he felt would preclude the possibility of sleep tonight.

א

"Let's go have a drink," Clayton Dean said to Preston Bennett, noticing the nightfall outside his window.

"Sure. I've got to make a couple of calls and check my e-mails first. Give me about fifteen minutes."

"I'll meet you out front. I'm ready for some fresh air."

Preston rose from his chair. "Yeah. See you out front," he said as he exited Dean's office and walked to his own. Clayton turned off his computer and followed him out. The elevator doors opened instantly after he pressed the button. Dean stepped into the empty cage and selected the ground floor, his normally churning mind blank during the brief ride down.

The elevator corridor and main entrance area was unusually quiet as he stepped out. Even this late, he thought, the State Department was generally a bustling place. Listening to the echo of his footsteps, Dean suddenly felt like an intruder locked in a museum after closing. Shaking off the spooky feeling, he pushed through the main entrance doors to the cooler air outside and paused for a moment to survey the street.

"Clay!"

The shout came from his right. He turned to see its source and, in the darkness, barely made out the image of Bill Burke, standing in the archway and waving. Dean turned to join him. As he approached the alcove, he began to see that there were others standing with Burke. One by one, he recognized most of the group.

"Bill, how are you?" he said, reaching the entrance.

"Good, Clay. And you?"

“A little tired.” Dean, after shaking Burke’s hand, stepped into the alcove, greeting the others, when he saw Elohim. “Good evening,” he said. “I haven’t seen You since the announcement, which is a little odd since You’ve been living right here in the building.”

Elohim smiled. “It is a pleasure to see you, Clayton.”

“Are you on your way somewhere?” Burke asked, unsure of whether to invite Dean to stay with the group.

“On my way out to grab a drink. No offense.” He directed his last comment to Elohim.

“None taken,” Elohim answered. “I’ve been known to have a glass of wine myself.”

Chuckling and shaking his head, Dean replied, “Somehow, I just don’t see You as a drinking buddy.”

Several of the group laughed, including Elohim, who said, “You are welcome to stay here with us this evening.”

Looking around at the assemblage, Clay declined. “No, thanks. It looks as if I’m interrupting something. Besides, Preston is on his way down to join me.”

Reese coincidentally was observing Elohim face and noticed a sudden frown. As Reese watched, it quickly disappeared.

Craig asked, “How’s he doing?”

“Okay,” answered Dean. “Just a little off, I guess.”

Reese was curious. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if my wife were under arrest for treason, I wouldn’t be up in my office checking e-mails. Maybe that’s just his way of coping with it.”

Reynolds said, “You know, when I took him into the observation room while Craig was interrogating Debbie, Preston stood at the glass and watched her flinch, watched her start to cry, and didn’t react. All he asked me was if we could turn on the sound. When I told him I couldn’t, he asked if she had told us anything. I told him ‘not really.’ Then he said there wasn’t any point in staying, and we left. It struck me as odd at the time.”

Reese suddenly bolted up and began to pace. Claire instantly recognized the familiar tendency and wondered what conclusion his mind was

reaching. Everyone else noticed his intensity and waited. He stopped pacing and asked, “Elohim, have You met Preston?”

Elohim answered by slowly shaking his head.

“All that time during the interviews, he never met Elohim. Those of you who hadn’t met Him or touched Him were anxious to do it. Preston was right outside the door all that time and didn’t want to.”

Reese resumed pacing and, as he walked, asked, “And when that started to become obvious to all of us, when we started to ask him why he didn’t want to meet Elohim….”

“He suddenly got sick,” said Margo.

“Exactly. Got sick and stayed home. And since then, he’s been working in the same building as Elohim and hasn’t seen Him once.” Stopping again, a brief flash of inspiration appearing on his face, Reese asked, “Clayton, have you…actually have any of you heard Preston speak Elohim’s name?”

Clayton answered immediately, “Yes, I have.”

Reese, receiving the answer he did not expect, said, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am. We were talking early in the interview process, right after you had arrived, Reese. And he told me that we had finally gotten a name for Elohim, that Elohim had given it to you.”

“You’re sure he spoke it?”

“Yes, I’m sure….” Dean hesitated. His eyes darted as he replayed the conversation in his mind. “No. Wait. I asked him for it. But I didn’t get the name until I read his report. What’s the point of this?”

“In a minute,” Reese said, deflecting the question. Looking around the group, Reese asked the rest, “Anyone? Does anyone remember Preston speaking the name?”

The group did not answer, most shaking their heads.

Thinking aloud, Reese said, “Behind the scenes. Close to a seat of power. It makes sense.” Everyone stared at Reese, attempting to discern his direction. Again addressing Dean, he asked, “Has Preston had any dealings with Stavros or Kaval?”

“Wait a minute. You think Preston is a traitor? That’s ludicrous.” Reese did not respond, instead just stood before Dean, waiting.

“Well, yes. Both of them. He was our liaison to the UN. He was actually more effective working with Kaval than was our ambassador. He knew Stavros…hell, everybody in politics knew him.” Clayton hesitated, remembering something, then continued in a neutral tone, “As a matter of fact, it was Preston who introduced Debbie to Stavros.”

Whirling to face Elohim, face flushed with emotion, Reese said, “You know all of our thoughts.”

Elohim nodded, a worried frown creasing his face.

“Can you single out anything from Preston?”

Still not speaking, Elohim only slowly shook his head.

Reese’s tone dropped lower, his expression one of intensity. “You told me Lucifer had learned to hide from you.”

“Lucifer? Hold on, Reese! Are you saying he’s the devil?” asked Dean.

“Clayton, right now, I’m just following my gut.” Reese returned his attention to Elohim. “Isn’t it true? You never know what’s in his mind, or even where he is?”

Elohim nodded once more, saying, “Yes, many centuries ago he learned to conceal himself.”

“I don’t understand,” interrupted Margo. “Elohim, when You pick up all of our thoughts, what we sense, don’t You pick up the thoughts of people interacting with Bennett…or seeing him? Wouldn’t You notice him through us, I guess?”

“Margo, that isn’t how it is. You are imagining the input coming to me as being like a movie. If it were that way, then yes, an invisible actor would be obvious. But it is rather like listening in on multiple conversations.”

“Like a conference call,” offered Matthew.

“Very much so, yes. Except there are billions of voices speaking at once. I am able to distinguish each voice, hear each word and thought in the dim, but I cannot discern one which is missing from the chorus. Through all of your eyes, I have of course seen Preston Bennett and I have heard his words through your ears. But to have realized this person in front of you was concealing his thoughts from me would have required me to focus directly on him as he spoke with you, sifting through the cacophony of thoughts, attempting to match his thoughts to your interaction. To do that, I

would need a reason, even if it was only curiosity. Lucifer has learned how not to catch my attention."

"That's why he stays behind the scenes, doing his work through others instead of seeking out a prominent position in society," Reese said.

"Yes," acknowledged Elohim. "A person of great fame or power would become too important for too many people. Their attention upon him would cause me to notice the lack of input from him."

"That's what happened a minute ago, wasn't it?" Reese asked. "When Clayton mentioned Preston, I saw a look of confusion or concern on Your face. You finally focused on him and noticed there was no input."

"Yes. You are correct." Elohim looked worriedly at Michael, who was still standing at the entrance to the alcove. Reese saw the contact and noticed the angel's reaction. Elohim resumed, "I found nothing coming from him."

As Elohim finished his response, Reese saw Michael unobtrusively skirt the wall behind the group, moving from the mouth of the alcove to the end opposite from the entrance.

Margo stood, unbuttoning her jacket to allow access to her pistol. "I'll go get him."

On her words, Reynolds and McWilliams quickly stood. Their obvious intention was to back her up, when Elohim said, "No. Please stay."

"Why? If he's behind so much, why not grab him?" asked Margo.

"Preston Bennett," Elohim explained, "is not Lucifer; he is only the vessel, to be disposed of once his usefulness is gone. If you were to detain him, all you would have in custody would be a shell."

"Like Sheffield," offered Burke.

"Yes. Except Sheffield's soul was removed by force. Lucifer may depart at will."

"I still don't understand something," Dean began. "If he's Satan, why was Debbie spying on him? Why didn't he just give the information to Stavros himself?"

"That's easy," Reese answered. "Stavros, probably at Bennett's design, saw Preston as the 'other side,' the enemy politically – on the side of the administration he despised. Having the information, carefully packaged by

Bennett, delivered surreptitiously by his wife gave it a lot more weight, a lot more credibility. Plus, if he overtly conspired with Stavros, he would run the risk of discovery. This way, if what Debbie Bennett did was discovered, as it eventually was, he would look like the victim and retain his position in the political structure."

"How Machiavellian," remarked Schmidt, who had been silently absorbing everything to this point.

"There are some theologians who believe Machiavelli was possessed by Lucifer," said Reese.

"What about Kaval?" asked Burke. "Is he dealing directly with him, or is there some sort of intermediary?"

"Kaval is a pawn and a fool!"

The gathering all spun to see the origin of the voice. Standing at the entrance to the alcove was Preston Bennett, his face contorted in a snarl of contempt. Everyone stood as Margo instinctively pulled her pistol, swinging it toward him. Ignoring her and addressing Elohim, Bennett advised, "Counsel her, *Father*, on the imprudence of her actions." Never in Reese's life had he heard the word *father* imbued with such hatred and disgust.

Elohim simply lifted his hand, signaling Margo to stop. She slowly lowered her weapon, not looking away from Bennett for a moment. When the pistol was holstered, with tremendous sadness in his voice, Elohim said, "So much time, my son."

Preston Bennett, his eyes seeming to blaze with emotion, answered, "So much time? What does that mean? Has it been too long since I came home for a visit? Oh! That's right! I can't come home, can I? You've locked me out."

Elohim's face slackened, the sadness clearly evident. "You know the reason, Lucifer. I explained it at the very beginning."

"The reason?" Preston Bennett took a step closer to Elohim. Reynolds and McWilliams moved to close ranks between the two, but Elohim waved them back. "That's right. The reason I can't come home is that I'm broken. I'm flawed." Bennett's voice rose in intensity. "Goddamn Almighty, the infinite power, the Creator of the Universe and everything in it, screwed up

his own offspring. That all-powerful being, who can hurl comets at the Earth and make snowflakes and even fiddle with time, can't fix ME?" Bennett's voice had risen to a scream by the final word.

Reese, watching Elohim closely, saw tears well up in his eyes. Elohim spoke to Lucifer softly, sorrowfully. "To correct your…flaw, as you call it, would require me to rewrite the physical laws of the universe. To fix you would mean the banishment of all of the other angels."

A profound loathing and abhorrence radiated from Bennett, palpable in its intensity. "Do you expect me to hear these words and say, 'It's okay, Daddy. I forgive you'?" He took another step forward. "I will never forgive you. You've made your choice." Nodding his head in the direction of Michael, he accused, "Them, instead of me."

"I am sorry, Lucifer. I love you."

"*Love* me? You don't know the meaning of the word. Do you love me as you love these mortal fools?" As he spoke, he waved his arms to encompass the gathering around them. "How can you love me and hurt me so? How can you love them and let them suffer as you do? They, your so-called beloved children, ask you that same question every day in their prayers as they become crippled and old and sick, as they lose a child or a wife, as they lie in bed at night hearing the sobs of their hungry children who do not have enough to eat. Do you think they love you? They hate you for this test you have created for them."

Schmidt spoke up, "There is no hatred in my heart for my God."

Whirling to face the Rabbi, Bennett shouted, "Shut up, you dolt! You are nothing but a lap dog. Even the most badly beaten cocker spaniel comes running, tail wagging, when his abusive master calls, hoping for a pathetic bit of attention."

Turning back to Elohim and ignoring Schmidt, he continued, "You've noticed the path mankind has begun to take. It's ironic. That most prized of traits, free will, is leading your precious flock away from the direction you choose. Guess what? That's how it works. That's why it's called *free* will. Most in the world have turned their backs on you. The rest will follow. It is not the result of some pervasive moral decline. It isn't due to overcrowding

or a shortage of resources. Humans are becoming wiser. They are catching on to you."

"It is you who have fomented this hatred," injected Bonavente.

Without even turning to face the Cardinal, Bennett responded with contempt, "Ahh. We are hearing from the other court jester. Tell me, Father, how do you reconcile your stated desire to populate Heaven with men possessing free will, and allow him to enter– someone who won't even exercise free will when choosing which vestment to wear, but only follows what he is told?"

Elohim ignored the question, his eyes boring into Lucifer's.

"But I will answer the buffoon. It is not I who lead them down this path. In fact, their wisdom, their insights, and their ability to think for themselves have led me to where I am today. It is within the minds of humans where I have found kindred souls, no pun intended. For they, too, have been abandoned and abused by you. They, too, are victims of your experiments, your quest for pets to amuse you in Heaven.

"They are not traveling down the road to ruin, as each of you believes. They have simply begun to see the truth – the truth about you – for the first time in the history of this planet, and they have used their free will to decide to opt out of your game, to find their way back to the race they would have become if you had not meddled."

As he spoke, the clock timer finally reached its set point, and the alcove was filled with light from the high-pressure sodium bulbs overhead. Claire noticed the people, out on the steps and sidewalk, as some of them recognized Elohim and alerted others. As word spread, they slowly ascended the steps, approaching the open side of the alcove.

"So none of this is your doing?" said Mario, his voice rising in pitch. "That is a lie. I have seen your work as have others who wear the cloth."

This time Bennett pivoted to confront the Cardinal. "You've seen *my* work? I have seen the work of the sycophants you refer to as your fellow priests. Your so-called church has thwarted the blossoming of mankind's maturity at every turn. You and your brothers have never cared about people. Your only goal, just like a drug peddler in a slum, has been to maintain their dependency. Except, instead of a needle or a line on a mirror,

the drug you pushed was *him*, no matter what harm it caused. As long as they were dependent upon him, they would also be dependent upon you. I don't even need to go back to the good old days of the Crusades. How many working mothers, struggling to raise too many children, could have had a better life if you had not told them birth control and abortion were sins? And this was done why? To create more pets for my father? How many women, hurt repeatedly by abusive husbands, would have gotten a divorce and found safety were it not against church law? And why do you do this? It is your institutionalized oppression of women…turning them into property. Not that long ago they could not enter your church without covering their heads! To this day they cannot become priests."

A sneer curled the corners of his lips. "And how many altar boys have *you* diddled, Mario?"

Bonavente furiously surged toward Bennett but was stopped by Leo and McWilliams.

Bennett continued, "And if you haven't…how many of your priests and bishops have, while you've looked the other way?"

The Cardinal's face was a mask of fury as he struggled against the restraints of his friends. Smiling, Bennett said in a taunting voice, "Wanting to kick my ass, Mario? That's not very Catholic of you."

From the other side of Elohim, Reese spoke. "As a matter of fact, Lucifer, it is very Catholic of him to want to kick your ass."

Bennett paused, leaving his back turned to Reese momentarily. "The hotshot has finally spoken. I've been waiting for you to chime it." He slowly turned and, nearly brushing against a still silent Elohim, walked directly to Reese, standing only inches from him.

Reese did not back away, quietly adding, "The Catholics have been kicking your ass for centuries."

Bennett's face showed a frozen half-smile as he tilted his head to one side, bringing it upright again. Reese looked deeply into the brown eyes, searching for a physical sign of Lucifer's habitation of Preston Bennett, seeing nothing.

"You don't fear me, do you?"

"Should I?"

“Yes, you should.” Bennett moved an inch or two closer to Reese, their chests nearly touching. The verbal exchange was spoken so softly, the others had to strain to hear the words.

Not even blinking and in a casual voice, Reese said, “I’m a little confused about this, Lucifer. Why should I fear you? If Elohim is the bad one, and you are just another of His poor, pathetic victims, doing nothing but picking up the pieces He left behind…helping the human race to self-actualize, to reach its true destiny, what is there to fear?”

For a brief moment, as Bennett listened, Reese saw a quick flash in his eyes, followed by a tightening of his muscles. The moment passed, and Reese watched as Bennett brought his emotions under control. In an even tone, he said, “Perhaps you’re right.”

“Perhaps,” Reese stated, adopting the voice used so many times when lecturing students. “Or perhaps not. Maybe we should take a look at motivation, Elohim’s and yours. What do you think?”

Bennett shrugged, his face impassive as his eyes continued to bore into Reese’s.

“Let’s see. Elohim put everything in motion…you know, the universe, the planets, the Earth, evolution, everything, right?”

Bennett only nodded.

“Then man came along, and Elohim picked the first one with free will – Adam – and nurtured him and his family. As He watched, He became a student of human nature. He realized that free will as well as the other impulses and urges of mankind were a double-edged sword. He also knew that living in Heaven came with tremendous individual power – power that in the wrong hands…in the hands of someone like, say, you…would be abused. Giving the keys to Heaven to someone like that would be akin to handing the keys for a Masserati to a drunk.” Reese paused, then blithely continued, “Are you with me so far, Lucifer?”

Reese saw Bennett’s jaw tighten, yet he again nodded.

“So He watched and waited, picking out the best of the bunch, the ones whose presence would not disrupt, would not ruin the society He was creating in Heaven. To make the cut a person needed to be benign, not corruptible by the power he or she would acquire, with an ingrained caring

and compassion for others, even strangers. How am I doing so far, Lucifer?"

In a deep, controlled voice, Bennett answered, "I suppose you could describe it that way."

"Thought so," Reese said lightly. "The people who freely choose to pursue the goal to reach Heaven and make the effort, make the sacrifices here to get there, go to Heaven. The ones left behind, the people who don't make the cut, aren't punished. They aren't sent to any hell. They are simply allowed to live their lives as they wish and then die. Isn't that what your 'mature' secularists maintain as being the alpha and the omega of life, anyway?"

Bennett did not respond.

"Cat got your tongue, Lucifer? I guess so. So, to continue, knowing what we know, do we have enough information to figure out what motives can be ascribed to your Father? He leaves people alone on Earth, doesn't meddle, doesn't manage or interfere in our lives, keeps those comets you mentioned away, along with any diseases which would wipe us out, so we can live our lives, and then He rewards the best of us with eternal life and happiness."

Reese's voice changed, losing the light, condescending tone of the classroom and adopting the steady, firm timbre of a district attorney cross-examining a felon.

"You, Lucifer, on the other hand, know your Father intimately. You sprang directly from Him. You know your very existence is toxic to His other creations. Yet, instead of destroying you in the beginning, when it was possible to do so with a minimum of collateral damage, He brought you to Earth. As He watched the progression, so did you. As He rejoiced in the appearance of man, you did not…you could not…for angels have no emotions, do they?"

Through clenched teeth, Bennett answered, "I do."

"Of course you do. Now, anyway. But you didn't then, did you?"

"I did."

"Oh, that's right. I keep forgetting. Before Adam, for thousands of years, there were the others. You were here. They were here. You had spent

hundreds of millennia sampling the senses of the animals, the bugs, everything. You tried them all, didn't you? Including Adam's ancestors, the ones without free will? You were an old hand at slipping in – tapping their senses, experiencing the intensity of life through an organism, any organism. Tell me, Lucifer, when the tiger chased down the gazelle, using its teeth and claws to rip it open, which of the two did you find more fun, more satisfying to possess for those moments?"

Saying nothing, Bennett continued to stare at Reese. Watching Bennett closely while describing the scene, Reese thought he saw a momentary flicker in his eyes.

"The excitement and the adrenaline felt by the tiger as it attacked? Or the pure terror of the gazelle at the instant it knew its fate? My guess is that you found that both of them had a certain appeal. Why not? After all, you survived. Your awareness wasn't snuffed out in a flash of horrendous pain. Long before the first sentient being roamed the Earth, you developed a taste for all of it: the smells, the sights, the sounds, the tastes, and the feelings of being alive. And, although every living thing on Earth was ever aware of its own mortality, mollifying its behavior, extending its life, you were impervious to such mundane concerns."

A slight smile curved the corners of Bennett's mouth. Yet, still, he said nothing.

"Even though it began as a necessity, at first not resented by you, your exile to this planet became a feast, a holiday beyond compare as you discovered the intensities of life with none of the consequences. You progressed from an angel without feelings, without emotions, to become something new, a hybrid, a melding of a pure spirit with the perceptions of a living thing."

As Reese spoke the last words, he saw something different in Bennett's eyes – an ever so fleeting glimpse of sadness. A revelation struck Reese. Taking a deep breath and making his voice as sympathetic as he could, he continued, "You were happy then, weren't you? You even thought your Father had created it all for you…to make it up to you for barring you from Heaven."

Barely audible, Bennett responded, “I thought he loved me.” The words, the tone, and the demeanor all expressed a deep pathos.

“Then Adam came to be. As He nurtured Adam and Eve, protected them, and caused them to flourish, it was then you began to suspect your Father’s true intentions.”

“Yes.” The lone word was said with bitterness.

“It was then you realized He was still trying to find others with whom to share Heaven, others instead of you. All of the depth and beauty and vibrancy of Earth was not a gift for you but a prelude, a stage He set for man to be the star. You no longer felt you were the beneficiary of His love…just an unfortunate mistake along the way.”

Bennett’s face was a steely mask, impenetrable and cold.

Reese continued, “Even then, you were full of hope, weren’t you? You still craved His love.”

A slight nod was the only acknowledgment from Bennett.

“So you decided that if your Father couldn’t love you as you were, you would use the skill you had practiced for years; you would step into one of these humans, become him, and, by doing so, perhaps then you could be worthy of His love.”

“It’s true. I still loved him then.”

“It was then you chose Cain, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I tried the others. It didn’t work.”

“You found out that, unlike the animals, humans had the ability to reject you.”

“Yes. As he rejects me.”

Claire tore her eyes from the tableau before her and glanced toward the steps. She saw that the silent crowd was growing in number, pressing together, trying to see and hear the drama within the alcove.

“Your choice was unfortunate. Cain, like yourself, had already fallen from grace.”

Bennett nodded.

“Instead of finding the love you sought, you only became more of an outcast. Through the lens that was Cain, you learned that he was the cause

of the end of Eden. You and he were becoming one. The ire directed toward him wounded you. As Cain felt bitterness, you also learned to feel it. As his bitterness grew to resentment, it filled you as well. As his smoldering resentment flared into hatred, the fire also consumed you. Until this point, you had only experienced the basic feelings of animals: fear, excitement, contentment. The conscious mind of man was able to concoct a far more complex web of emotions – emotions which were all new to you, emotions with which you had no experience. The rejection of Cain by his parents, Adam and Eve, became a metaphor for your rejection by your own Father. With Cain's help you learned to hate. Through Cain's experience as well as your own, your hate was directed not only at your own Father…but at mankind, as well. For they were becoming the Chosen…the ones who could go to the place you were denied, who could receive the love of which you were deprived."

Bennett seemed to deflate slightly, losing a minuscule amount of the rigidity he had minutes ago.

"Since those days, you have spent every minute of your existence, every ounce of your energy, fighting Him, trying to prevent as many of mankind as you possibly can from entering the Gates of Heaven. This goal satisfies both your hatred for your Father and your hatred for mankind, doesn't it?"

A trace of the former anger returned to Bennett's face as he said, "It does. In the most glorious of ways. And now, during only his third visit, his third harvest of fools, he is nearly defeated. His plan is virtually in ruins. Soon, there will be no others to join him. I have nearly won."

"I have one more question, Lucifer."

"Ask it quickly. This is becoming tiresome."

"Do you know why He has allowed you to stay here?"

Bennett's eyes widened slightly, but his tone remained contemptuous as he answered, "His guilt and the fraud he perpetrates called his love."

"Actually, no. You pegged it. Earth is His boot camp. But you are not some powerful, malevolent force which He cannot touch. You are here because you serve His purpose. You are nothing but His hard-ass drill instructor whose job it is to wash out the undeserving. The meaner you get, the better job you do for Him." Looking over Bennett's shoulder, Reese

asked, “Isn’t that what You’ve said, Elohim? I believe the phrase was that Lucifer’s presence on Earth had a certain ‘utilitarian benefit,’ that he was a ‘litmus test’ for those who wished to come to Heaven.”

Elohim did not answer. Reese, again, saw Bennett’s jaw muscles tighten as he fought to retain self-control.

“The Jews have known it all along. It’s your job to provide the ‘evil inclination.’ All of your work, all of your hatred, and all that you have done for hundreds of centuries have served this being you hate so much. And, if you ever stop doing your assigned job, you’re fired, you’re gone. You are brushed out of existence with the mere twitch of His little finger. You’re not on the brink of winning some battle with Him. You’re just starting to get the hang of this job.” Reese watched the pressure building within Bennett. His eyes bulged. His skin reddened. His fists clenched and re-clenched.

“And the best part of this, Lucifer, is that you’ve known it all along. Why else would you hide from Him, perfecting your ability to conceal your thoughts, deeds, and feelings from Him, cowering in a dark corner like a rat hiding from a snake?”

Instead of the anger Reese expected to evoke, Bennett laughed. As the peals of his laughter continued, they echoed off the stone walls, until eventually dying away. With a smile of extreme satisfaction, Bennett gloated, “Did you really believe you could bait me? Did you think me such a fool not to understand the truth?”

It was Reese’s turn to look back silently.

“As you said, I have known for a long time the purpose I served. Since the last visit I have waited, patiently, for this moment. I have waited for a day to come when those loyal to me had not only the will but the means to change the course of his plan. That day is today. That time is now.”

Bennett, stepping back from Reese, casually waved his arm toward the sky. “As we speak, the skies over several cities each contain an airplane. These are very extraordinary planes for they are flown by pilots who are waiting for my orders. They are also special because of their cargo. Each of them carries a device, designed by man, perfected by man, to kill men and, of course, women, children, and any other living, breathing being who happens to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time. Smallpox, nerve gases,

modified anthrax, the list goes on. These humans my father so prizes have been quite creative in recent years. There is enough in the sky, ready to deploy, to kill millions immediately, with many more millions to follow as new, genetically-modified diseases spread."

"Another attack?" asked Reese. "What will that accomplish? The Chosen will be restored. You will gain nothing, and you will lose the input of all of those millions whose connection you crave."

His smile broadening, Bennett replied, "You're assuming I plan to kill them."

"You're not? Then, why the planes? Why the weapons?"

"Because," answered Bennett, relishing the moment, "if they are to be killed, their blood will be on his hands, or yours, but certainly not mine."

Reese thought for moment, suddenly understanding the plan. "You want Him to call it off."

"I knew if you had a minute or two, you'd figure it out," Bennett taunted derisively.

Margo caught Reese's eye. "I don't understand."

Explaining, Reese said, "What choice does he have? He can't fight Elohim head on. Turning more people to evil may slow down the stream, but it doesn't stop the flow of the few to Heaven. Remember, we're talking about eternity here. The only option remaining is blackmail."

"Very good, Dr. Johnson. But I'm not just relying on him to call it off. I'm relying on you, too."

Reese again faced Bennett. "You mean, if we choose not to go."

"Exactly. If all of the Chosen decide to stay, I call off the planes."

"You're capitalizing on the basic nature of those who are chosen. You know they wouldn't be able to live for an eternity with the guilt of all of those deaths, all of the pain and suffering."

"You're close. It's even more clever than that. I'm actually extremely proud of myself."

"Of course!" said Reese. "If any of those among the Chosen did decide to go anyway…."

“Really wouldn’t fit the old man’s criteria anymore, would they? All of a sudden, they wouldn’t be quite the noble, ‘caring-about-others-more-than-themselves’ people he thought they were.”

As the gathering paused to assimilate Lucifer’s words, Elohim finally spoke. “I have watched this…and listened to this long enough. My son, Reese was accurate when he shared my words with you. You have served my purpose. Sadly, it was not what I had planned for your existence to become, yet so it was. And as such, I allowed it to remain. But now, as you plot the deaths of a multitude, for the sole purpose to spoil my wishes, you have gone too far. This must end. Tonight.”

“And what will you do?” asked Lucifer, a twisted smile spreading across his face. “Kill me? Make me cease to exist?”

Bennett burst into a maniacal laughter, which slowly ebbed away. “There is something I’m afraid you don’t understand. In the epochs since we last met, I’ve grown stronger. I have robbed and pilfered from millions, not their property, not their money…their strength.” Gesturing at Michael, he scoffed, “As your cadre of angels, under your misguided instructions, gave and gave and gave their life force away, I have taken and taken and taken. Not only are they no match for me…” – he stepped closer to Elohim, defiance and contempt twisting his face – “neither are you.

“Even if I have underestimated my strength, even if you and your pathetic army can nullify my existence, those men in the planes have their orders. The release triggers will be pulled. The death will rain down from the sky if I do not stop it.” Bennett laughed again. “You see, if you kill me, you kill millions. As you have said to all of us, in your infinitely tautological way, it’s all about choices. It’s time you made your choice. Put an end to this nauseating exploitation of yours. Stop the harvesting and go home, content with what you have. Leave the Earth to me…or I will end it for you.”

“As I said, I have watched you, my son….”

“Stop that! Do not call me your son!”

“As I have watched, I have observed your gradual descent into madness.”

“You lie! You have not been able to look into me.”

“One need not see into the mind of a maggot to smell the stench of its work. I have watched the ripples formed by your deeds as they spread through this world. Do you believe for a moment that I would walk away, that I would leave the hearts and souls of billions in your hands?”

“You have no choice. If you don’t, they die.”

“Death is a better choice for them than enduring you.”

Bennett’s fury was growing exponentially. “YOU’RE BLUFFING!”

“You have forgotten. Bluffing has never been a part of my repertoire.” Elohim lifted his hand. The movement caused Bennett to flinch. Indicating Bennett’s pocket, Elohim said, “Call them. Release your foulness. End this. NOW!” The final word thundered off the walls.

Bennett, the slightest twinge of self-doubt appearing on his face, immediately replaced it with unbridled hostility. Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he withdrew a cell phone and punched the first number, listening for the ring. It began and continued to ring, unanswered. Ending the call, Bennett pressed the second number, again getting only the ring. Angrily, he pressed the third and then the fourth with no result. His frustration driving his hands to shake, Bennett continued calling phone after silent phone.

Elohim watched quietly, his eyes full of pity, before finally speaking to Lucifer. “You have no planes in the sky. You have no foul and hideous death poised for release upon mankind. Your men are no more. Each discovered the true cost of consorting with you. A message was delivered personally by Gabriel, Uriel, Uzziel, Sammuel, Raphael, Nemamiah, Jophiel, Abdiel. From this day forth, my child, every man or woman who succumbs to your contemptible seductions, who plots to kill on your behalf, who schemes to bespoil the beauty of another’s soul at your behest, will receive this message.”

Bennett, still tightly gripping the cell phone, disbelief deforming his face, barely uttered, “You can’t. You have never intervened.”

“It’s true that since the days of Eden, I have not meddled. It was a promise made and a promise kept for all of these centuries. And it is a promise from which I have been not only liberated but beseeched to ignore, for I have come to understand that it is a promise kept falsely. When the mother of Abel and Cain begged for me not to intrude, it was I who

misunderstood. She only wanted for her children to grow and thrive out from under my shadow. She instinctively understood that which I did not. For man to enjoy his own victories, he must also endure his own mistakes. Today, a new promise – to meddle not – is made, but it is based upon this new understanding."

Bennett stared silently, mesmerized by his father.

"By serendipity or design, allowing you to exist among them, unchecked, has not been a fulfillment of that promise; it has been a violation. You are my son and, as such, my agent. I promised to not intervene; yet, permitting you to have your malevolent way with mankind is tampering to the most heinous degree. I have erred. Deceiving myself into believing that you served a purpose…my purpose…was a mistake. A mistake which shall be undone tonight."

Mustering the strength to speak, Bennett protested, "You cannot destroy me. You have said so yourself."

"And that is true. I cannot."

"Nor can you send me away."

"That is also true. You would simply return."

Encouraged by Elohim's confirmations, Bennett straightened, absently dropping the phone onto the stone floor, the clatter preternaturally loud. In a more confident voice than a moment before, he asked, "Then, if this is to end tonight, what will you do?"

"I will do that which I can. I will, to use the word offered by a friend, quarantine you. You will remain on Earth or leave if you choose. It will matter not to me. But you will have no further access to mankind. You will never again possess another mortal. You will no longer revel in the countless attachments to millions, feeding off of their senses and their very vitality. You will be an observer, as if within a glass sphere, but the glass shall be opaque, for I will not permit you to even embrace the senses of the lowliest animal."

As Bennett heard his sentence being pronounced, his eyes began to flash, the snarl returned to his lips. "And how will you do this? You cannot even find me, if I choose not to be found."

“It is true. When you conceal yourself, you are invisible to me. It is only when you send out one of your tendrils, touching another living being, that I become aware of your existence. Even then, I cannot follow the filament back to its source. You have become quite adept at obfuscating. But I can, through my angels, snip the filament the instant it connects, severing you from your goal. And that I will do, tirelessly and for an eternity.”

The implications of Elohim’s words, the realities of being cut off from everything, were beginning to insinuate themselves into his mind. With a tinge of panic, Bennett said, “You cannot do this.”

“I can. Would you like a demonstration?” Elohim turned to Michael and nodded. The Archangel walked to Clayton Dean and stood before him. Elohim continued, “This is a good man. He has struggled for a lifetime to find the righteous path, never quite reaching his goal because of you. He has been one of your legion, one of the many caught in your web. You have tied him to you, whispered in his ear, never tired in your effort to keep him adrift. Tonight he will be free.”

Clayton Dean, hearing Elohim’s words, feeling them resonate deep within his heart, saw Michael lean forward and gently kiss his forehead. In that instant, he felt a powerful, whirling sensation, ceasing a moment after it began. Suddenly, a weight – present for so long it had become a part of him, unnoticed – was gone, as were his doubts, anxiety, and fear.

“At this moment, as we speak, it has begun. Around the Earth my angels are doing my work. Do you feel it, Lucifer? Among the billion sources streaming into you, are you starting to the notice the absence of a few? Soon this will be followed by a few more. And so it will proceed until none remain.”

Still staring at Clayton, aware of the severing which had just occurred, Bennett asked, “I’ll be alone?”

“No, my son. You will not. I am not capable of such a harsh punishment. As time goes on, your sphere will become filled with others.”

“Who? Who would you banish in such a way?”

“Kindred souls. Souls who, through a flaw in my design, have remained on Earth, multiplying in number, teasing, cajoling, and incessantly attempting to influence and invade the pure hearts of the living. Those who

have committed the foulest of offenses. Those who are irredeemable. They are the ones who will join you for an eternity."

Without warning, Bennett struck out at Elohim, knocking him down. Claire screamed. Melissa shrieked. Reaching down, Preston Bennett bent his fingers, prepared to wrap them around Elohim's neck. As he looked past Bennett, Elohim's voice thundered, "Michael, no! You'll be destroyed."

The Archangel had swiftly stepped to Elohim's side, seizing Bennett's arm. At the instant of contact, an eerie sound began, vibrating the stone floor and walls of the alcove – a deep rumble, resembling distant thunder, mixed with a humming, crackling sound, as if from a massive generator. The effect of the contact on Michael was immediately apparent and staggering. Bennett turned to give his full attention to the angel, gripping Michael's shoulder with his free hand.

The added connection accelerated the process as Michael began to collapse in the grip, his eyes looking beseechingly at Bennett for mercy. The unnatural sound grew in intensity and volume, rising to the pitch of a whine, nearly deafening to all. As the mortals watched the one-sided conflict between two titans, they were immobilized by the sight, frozen by the spectacle. No one moved as Michael's head lolled to the side, as he struggled mightily to maintain his grasp on Bennett.

The entire space seemed to be filled with a charge. The bystanders, including those spread out on the steps, felt the hair on their bodies stand on end. Rearing back his head, Bennett loosed a roar filled with anger and hatred. Removing one hand from Michael's shoulder, Bennett began to reach upward…to clasp his head, his obvious intent to complete the annihilation, when Matthew suddenly screamed, "NO!" and broke loose from Claire, running to the falling angel. Before she could react, Matthew tucked his head under Michael's arm, hugging him tightly.

"MATTHEW!" Claire shouted, too late.

Michael, feeling the presence of Matthew…the willing contribution of his strength, opened his eyes and looked down at him and smiled weakly. "LOOK! IT'S HELPING!" yelled Melissa, running to help her brother and the angel. Both Reese and Claire, joined by Reynolds, reacted instantly,

dashing to follow Melissa. Too late to stop her from also embracing the angel, they joined her in the act.

Lucifer saw and sensed the addition of others. His furor grew even more intense. Again he gripped Michael's shoulder, squeezing ferociously. Determined to reverse the respite caused by the intervention of Matthew, Melissa, Reynolds, Claire, and Reese, Lucifer called upon more strength, more energy stored within, and, in moments, Michael's energy again flagged. Leo Schmidt walked slowly to the spectacle. Rather than attaching himself to Michael, he reached out and gripped the shoulder of Bennett. The direct contact caused a violent trembling within him. Leo saw that Mario Bonavente had followed him, grasping Bennett's other shoulder and murmuring words Leo did not at first understand, only to recognize them moments later as the Rites for an Exorcism. Craig rushed to join the huddled group, as did Margo, Burke, Walter, and Doris.

Just in the moments since he had joined the contact, Reese felt his energy draining, sapped by Lucifer. In less time than a minute he felt himself sinking into a pit of fatigue, as if having wandered for days without food or water. Reese could tell the same thing was happening to the others, as he looked into their faces. Weariness and the beginnings of despair showed on all of them, yet Bennett withstood their amassed force; steely determination born of hatred filled his face.

Barely able to see through his own profound fatigue, Reese saw the mighty Archangel Michael close his eyes again. No longer standing on his own, Michael was completely supported by the others. Somewhere within him, an unstoppable will drove him to maintain his grip upon Bennett's arm, even if it meant the end of his existence. Both from Elohim's words and from what he sensed, Reese knew what was happening within him, his loved ones, and the others. The pure, polarized, intensified negative energy of Lucifer was nullifying the balance within each of them.

If they did survive this, their souls would no longer be compatible with the environment and the residents of Heaven. They, too, would be banished for an eternity. The nobility of trading one's life for the good of others paled against the reality of their actions, for they were offering their eternal place in Heaven.

As they all weakened, the whining, whirring, crackling sound crescendoed, obliterating any chance for speech, clouding Reese's mind and disorienting his judgment. Barely able to look, Reese saw Claire, his beloved wife and lifelong companion, as her mouth stretched open in a scream of agony and frustration, a scream he could not hear above the cacophony. Their eyes connected. In them he could see that she was on the verge of giving up, surrendering to the barrage emanating from Lucifer, and releasing her grip. He knew that she saw the same look from him. As they stared into each other's eyes, while standing only several inches apart, Reese felt his love for her within himself. Although always there, it was now distilled, distinct, identifiable. For Claire…for Melissa…and for Matthew, Reese plumbed to the depths of his being and somehow found more strength.

It was not enough. For, although love possessed a power greater than a hundred thousand men, Lucifer was tapping into a reservoir he had been patiently filling for tens of thousands of years – a vast, black ocean of desperation, hate, envy, malice, pride, resentment, jealousy, malignity, hopelessness, and malevolence, carefully siphoned off from the millions who had erred by allowing him into their souls.

As the last vestiges of strength faded within him, mercilessly sucked out by the vortex of Lucifer's hunger, for the first time in his life, Reese felt defeated. Overwhelmed by the sheer power of Lucifer, unable to apply his trusted resource – his intellect, Reese suffered a feeling foreign to him; he knew no options. There were no other choices. He could not release his grip, leaving his wife and children attached to this monster. And it was now obvious, as he remained firmly, voluntarily locked into this channel of destruction, that they would not prevail. Unbidden, his new destiny flooded his mind. A fate without hope. A providence of despair.

Realizing that his eyes had again closed some moments ago, Reese became aware of the interior of his very being as it was scoured by Lucifer. He felt a nearly indescribable violation as Lucifer invaded him to his core, sopping up the remaining traces of Reese's life force. His knees weakened, and he felt himself collapsing. He sensed the others around him doing the

same. It was undeniable. The fight was over. Lucifer had won. In a flash, Reese suddenly knew he would take that thought to his death.

A small part of Walter Penfield's mind was fascinated as he observed the energy transfer from his own body, through Michael's, and into Lucifer. Coldly, logically, he understood the process and knew that soon, within probably moments, the electrical charge needed to contract his heart muscles would be sufficiently disrupted to stop the operation. The normally automatic act of breathing already required his conscious intervention to continue. Every muscle in his body burned with pain as it competed with the overwhelming force for enough resources to maintain his grip and continue to stand.

Craig McWilliams experienced the same sensations as Penfield, without the understanding of the physical mechanism. 'I'm dying!' he simply thought to himself. His determination to hang on, to give every ounce of his being, was unbowed. The return of his legs, the ability to feel fully human, was a debt he owed, even if the gift was only enjoyed for a few days.

Doris Penfield foundered, the weight of her body falling against her already wavering husband.

Mario Bonavente, gasping for breath and fighting the effect of the bombardment of sound – which seemed on the verge of ripping him to shreds – had a sudden revelation. Throughout his life, from the time he was a small boy, whenever the challenges he faced grew daunting, Mario knew he could always call upon the strength of God to help him. Even though Elohim had told him no help was given or, in fact, needed, he had always been certain that he had felt the gentle, loving hand of God, touching him and giving him the strength to prevail. Now, as he faced the greatest trial of his life, he could not call upon God for help. In fact, God was calling upon him for his help. It was time to repay. Mustering the strength to open his eyes, Mario looked directly into the snarling face of Lucifer, defiantly returning his malevolent stare.

Melissa felt herself slipping into unconsciousness. Hopelessly searching within, she found no more to give, no hidden reserves to tap, and surrendered, her body falling limp under Michael's arm.

Matthew, feeling rather than seeing his sister slip down, was unable to help.

Claire, enfolding both of her children within her arms as she continued her grip on Michael, sobbed with despair, also too enfeebled to react.

Nicholas Reynolds dropped to his knees before Michael, sliding his contact with the angel down to his leg as he wrapped his other arm around Melissa, holding her upright.

Bill Burke, having given more than he believed he had to give, slowly slipped away from consciousness, crumbling downward, yet somehow he managed to preserve his contact with Michael.

Margo Jackson somehow stood rigid. Her mind flashed back to Marine boot camp, remembering her own determination not only to compete with the men but to prove that a lesser set of standards for a woman would never be needed. A Marine was a Marine, she thought, man or woman. With a long practiced and never forgotten determination, her mind did not entertain the possibility of failure. She ignored the sensation as her knees trembled beneath her.

The Rabbi could not believe the pounding inflicted upon him. The din, having risen to the magnitude of thunder, shook him as if he were at the epicenter of an earthquake. The depletion of his energy, streaming out of him through his arms and hands, was fierce. His eyes still open, he saw the malignant countenance of Lucifer before him, unrestrained ecstasy twisting the hateful face. As his own anger grew, Leo used it, tapping into the fury, and spat directly into Satan's face.

'It's over.' Though he fought against it, the thought forced its way into Reese's mind. Despair and sadness swept over him. As much as by Lucifer's touch, he was wounded by the reality of his own failure. For, not only was he dying, his beloved children, his own recently proven to be flesh and blood, were dying with him as was his soulmate, Claire. It was all because of him. The repercussions of his errors added to the onslaught he suffered as he felt the last of his strength slip away.

Reese, as if in slow motion, began to collapse. Falling forward as his knees buckled, he felt himself fall against Claire and the others. His ability to discern reality also failed, not able to distinguish the various sensations

he felt as he collided with other bodies. In his confusion, no longer certain if his perceptions were real or hallucinations, Reese suddenly felt a firm grip on his upper arm. He also sensed a flow of warmth, of power from the grip. A new source. A fresh supply. It was trickling into him, as if he had suddenly connected with a recharger. Somehow, he was actually able to feel some of it pass through him, moving on to augment the weakened flow which combated Lucifer.

Convinced he was dreaming yet hoping he was not, Reese felt a second hand grasp his other arm, more energy merging with the flow into him and through him. Then a third. Obviously not a dream, not an hallucination. He felt himself slowly recouping strength as he forced his knees to straighten. Turning, he opened his eyes and saw that it was a stranger, a bespectacled, middle-aged man, who was holding his arm. Another stranger, a woman, had gripped his other. From behind them, coming through the mouth of the alcove, Reese saw the mass of people who had gathered. They were all surging forward, arms outstretched, willingly and eagerly offering their own energy, their own lives, their own souls in this conflict with evil.

As the new arrivals spliced themselves into the circuit, the original twelve combatants experienced a gradual, slight revitalization, benefitting from the flow of energy through them, before passing it on to Lucifer. Although it did not seem possible to Reese, he heard the maelstrom of sound grow even greater as the battle was joined by the new recruits. He saw Melissa, still held by Nicholas, open her eyes and stand up. He rejoiced in once more looking into Claire's eyes, seeing a renewed resolve tighten her jaw as she benefitted from the influx. Matthew, too, opened his eyes. He turned to look at his father and managed a weak smile.

The throng extended from the alcove, down the steps, and into the sidewalk and street. They all pushed forward, connecting with those before them, adding their individual might to the fray. Only those who had been near the alcove had heard the words and knew the reason for this confrontation; those behind only sensed the need for their help and the importance of the need. As the communal force grew, attracting those on the street and in their cars, others began coming out from their offices, their

apartments, their homes. The pool of living energy spread out over blocks in all directions.

Walter Penfield, once again able to focus, to think, observed the air around them as it began to glow, and immediately comprehended the magnitude of the energy flux, within which he was at the epicenter. The air itself was ionizing, the first step, he knew, in the creation of a plasma field. It was a phenomenon only attainable at the heart of a star or in the nanometer-sized focal point of a mammoth particle accelerator. The visible manifestation of pure energy was swirling around them. As the power intensified, the velocity of the rotation increased, giving physical proof of the vortex they had all felt.

The Archangel Michael, more acutely than the others, felt the turning of the tide as the mass of humans arrived to repay a timeless debt. His purely positive energy, which had been almost completely nullified by Lucifer, like the arcing between the poles of a battery, was returned from the brink of nonexistence when Matthew had touched him. As the others had offered their own stored energy to him, they individually paid the cost of their entire being, purchasing with it a few more moments of opposition against this evil. Michael had sensed a faint galvanization at first, which was quickly exploited by Lucifer, who seemed to have the ability to tap into a limitless supply of his own negative force. But with the addition of the multitudes in the streets, Michael, with excruciating slowness, felt himself regain strength.

Lucifer, also aware of the newfound resistance within Michael, reached deeper and farther, summoning every stored and each available portion of power. His human form, Preston Bennett, was not fit to serve as a conduit for such forces. The very atoms comprising his physical being reacted to the energy field by shedding electrons, moving to different states of being, and disrupting the properties of the molecules they made up, which then killed off the cells that comprised Preston Bennett's body.

Michael, Schmidt, and Bonavente observed the physical manifestation of this disintegration first as they felt Bennett's flesh soften and turn powdery beneath their fingers, the muscles and bones underlaying the flesh collapsing as the collagen and calcium lattice supporting structures failed

catastrophically. The fierce turbulence of the air around them opportunistically attacked Bennett, carrying away the powdery residue. Mario Bonavente, defying the intense brightness, was still staring directly into the face of Bennett as he saw, like the faces carved into Mount Rushmore after suffering through a million years of wind and rain, the features erode, exposing his skull. The soft tissues ensconced within the protection of the skull, desiccated and descended to their constituent parts, were sucked out by the wind, scattering. The flesh and the organs of his body suffered the same fate, as Leo and Mario found themselves fighting to maintain their grips on handfuls of powder. The empty skull was itself slowly losing its mass in the whipping gale. The wind, passing over the empty eyeholes, resonated as would the blowing of breath over the top of a bottle, adding a mournful, clarinet-like double-tone to the cacophony of sound.

The two men of God, finding themselves clutching only a skeleton, released the remains of the physical Bennett and transferred their touches to Michael, combining their contributions with the now mighty torrent of energy coursing into him, replenishing and replacing the positive force of the Archangel as it continued to be nullified and consumed by Lucifer. As the final bits of skeleton blew away in the tempest, the hands of the Archangel encircled a column of energy which was pulsating and flaring like the surface of the sun. Unencumbered by the limitations of occupying a human form, the negative force fought by Michael gained even more strength. The radiant vortex enveloping the alcove had steadily brightened from its initial glow to a directionless, intense beacon. The swirling of the ionized air around them intensified until it resembled a raging whirlpool, amplifying further until it seemed to be a tornado of light, with Michael and Lucifer in the center of the eye.

From a distance, the spectacle shone under the clouds so brightly it illuminated them, revealing every detail of the tufts and folds, eradicating the grayness, with only an immaculate whiteness remaining. The staggering fury of the conflict filled the air with the roaring din of unabating thunder. Throughout the boulevards and avenues, thousands of people emerged from

their buildings, curious and entranced, walking, then running toward the locus.

Upon nearing…reaching the assembled mass, those who held within themselves a vestige of good, a balance of energy, merged unselfishly with the throng, willingly sacrificing their essence instinctively for the vanquishing of evil…for the long-awaited restoration of symmetry on the Earth.

Still Lucifer remained.

The reservoirs of evil, so inexhaustible in the world, were channeled and drawn upon to oppose the onslaught. As all the new arrivals melded themselves into the fray, adding their drops of virtue to the pool, Lucifer found yet another source of malevolence to thwart it.

Ears nearly shattered by the thunderous din, eyes instantly parched by the cyclonic wind, Reese somehow succeeded in his struggle to see. Michael, once more standing erect, fierce determination transfiguring his face into a stony mask, was locked in his death grip with the pulsing column of Lucifer. Those around him, eyes squeezed closed, heads ducked, mouths pulled in tight grimaces, appeared engulfed in a never-ending explosion, their clothes and hair whipping madly, their very skin shaken by the buffeting of the forces.

Then, in the nucleus of the mind-numbing tumult and chaos, Reese witnessed an impossible sight. Above them, amidst the tempestuous winds and searing light, Reese saw a lone white dove circling down, impervious to the storm. From its miraculous presence, Reese knew its name. Aloud, heedless of the countervailing pandemonium, he spoke, "*Spiritus Sanctus*."

He watched as the being, floating as if riding the currents of a peaceful sky, looped gently down, sweeping mere inches above the heads of the adversaries of evil. As it flew, threads of white light attached from the Holy Spirit to them. The burgeoning mass of filaments stretched, as the dove flew farther from Reese, and then gathered into a bundle. Swooping below the keystone of the alcove entry arch, the third part of the Holy Trinity careered left and right above the crowd, sending down a new strand to every person it passed.

As more and more of the men and women were touched, Reese sensed a transformation within himself. A never-before-seen clarity supplanted his thoughts and emotions. Doubt was wiped away. Fear was expunged. A new strength, born from a purity of purpose, filled his heart and his mind. The complex of rationalizations and emotions, garnered through a lifetime, was distilled. The traits, impulses, and thoughts, always present and always contrary to the desired goals of happiness and fulfillment, were filtered and removed, leaving within him only the pristine essence of himself, uncontaminated by the vagaries of his experiences. He felt his resolve crystallize, his determination magnify, his fortitude expand a thousandfold.

The metamorphosis, caused by the touch of the Holy Spirit and felt by Reese, occurred within each individual in the multitude. The impact of the change was immediate. The formless entity called Lucifer instantly felt the crushing wave of opposing polarity. For the first moment since the confrontation commenced, he experienced the feelings of panic and fear, for, struggle as he might, he could not summon a matching force to counteract the assault. He was unable to ignore that the fiber of his being was becoming steadily, inexorably neutralized, nullified. His energy, never to be lost in this universe, was instead becoming assimilated, diluted, dispersed. No single foe was crushing him with a mighty blow. Lucifer was being consumed by thousands of hungry mouths, like a lion eaten by an army of ants. He knew the lion would continue to exist, yet only scattered throughout the guts and the eventual feces of the insects.

The slightest, almost imperceptible abatement of the deafening roar was felt, more than heard, by Reese and the others. Not at first certain it was truly happening, Reese received confirmation as the diminution continued. The violently whirling wind surrounding them also slowed. Bonavente, looking at the pillar of fire that was Lucifer, perceived a weakening in the inferno. Encouraged by the signs of an imminent victory, Michael and all of the others redoubled their focus.

The seething light of Lucifer dimmed further. The cyclone continued to slow gradually. As the polarity shifted, as the equilibrium returned, the rotational force of the wind ceased only momentarily before imperceptibly

beginning its circuitous route in the opposing direction. Once counterclockwise, it now accelerated in a clockwise course.

As if the shift in the air was the final signal, the burning, ionized glare, which permeated the alcove and beyond, dimmed until it softened into a muted glow. The energy within Michael's hold was no longer the tumultuous, flaring conflagration it had been just moments ago. Now it was a darkened, umber orb, confined between his hands.

Matthew, staring in wonder at the dim sphere, fought the tension born of desperate determination and forced his fingers to release his grip on Michael. One by one, the others slowly did the same, prepared to immediately reconnect to the Archangel if any sign that it was needed would appear. What had been a thunderous roar was now a deep, soft thrum. The once ferocious wind had subsided to a breeze, gently clinging to its clockwise direction.

Sensing movement to his side, for the first time since the beginning of the confrontation, Reese noticed Elohim, rising to his feet from the stone floor. Wordlessly, he walked to Michael and took the ball of energy that was Lucifer, holding it gently in his hands. As Reese and the others watched, the formless orb subtly began to change, reforming and reshaping until it resembled a face. It was not the face of Preston Bennett, not a face recognizable to Reese.

Elohim looked at the visage between his cupped hands. Suddenly tears streamed down his cheeks. In a choked and pitiful voice, Elohim spoke the name, "Cain!"

The countenance of Cain, though formed from the darkly glowing assemblage of Lucifer's feeble remaining energy, twisted in an expression of grief and sorrow, stared up into Elohim's eyes. The holographic image of Cain moved as his mouth spoke the words, somehow audible to all, "Father. Please forgive me."

Elohim gasped, overcome by his emotions, the gasp followed by a whimper. Struggling to speak, he quietly said, "I do forgive you, my son." Pausing as he again choked on his own sobs, Elohim continued, "You know I cannot allow you to remain here among them."

The face of Cain looked up at his father for a long time, comprehension and acceptance written deeply in his features. “I know,” Lucifer acknowledged. “I understand.” His features softening, changing to an almost childlike expression, he said, “Before I go, I have one thing to ask.”

His chin trembling with sorrow, Elohim asked, “And what is that?”

“It has been so long. For one more time…may I feel Your love?”

Elohim’s face twisted in unspeakable remorse as he slowly bent his elbows and held his child against his breast. As he embraced Lucifer, a single tear trickled from his cheek and fell down onto his son. As it touched, all heard Lucifer sigh.

After a time, Elohim held Lucifer away to see his face once again.

“Thank you, Father. I will hold Your love within me for an eternity.”

For minutes Elohim gazed deeply into Lucifer’s eyes. Neither spoke until Elohim said, “It is time, my son. I must say good-bye.”

“I know.”

Lucifer’s eyes closed for a moment, savoring the connection that he had craved for a thousand lifetimes. Opening them, he looked at Elohim and smiled, saying, “Good-bye, Father. I love You.”

“And I have always loved you, my child.”

As if stepping through a gossamer curtain, one by one Elohim’s angels arrived at the alcove, each and all holding before them the blackened mass of irredeemable souls collected in their journeys. They stepped forward to Elohim, Michael, and Lucifer, encircling them.

Addressing the others, Elohim’s voice grew stronger, echoing off the walls. “Please leave us. Please step out of this alcove.”

Reese had rejoined Claire, Melissa, and Matthew, and they stood watching the spectacle. The others turned toward the entrance and began slowly walking, waiting for those on the steps to back away to allow them room. Reese, glancing at his daughter, noticed tears streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes were riveted on the reddish-brown orb held by Elohim, Cain’s features still visible. As the area began to clear, Reese, intending to shepherd his family away from what was to come next, turned, and with his arms spread, urged in a solemn voice, “Let’s go.”

Matthew turned toward the exit, twisting his head around so that he could see Elohim and the angels, and took a step. Claire began to pivot, then paused, indecision coloring her features. Melissa did not move. Reese touched her shoulder and murmured, "Come on, honey."

"What's he going to do?" she asked, not taking her eyes off Cain.

"He explained it before. He's sending him away."

"To hell!" Matthew added.

"But he's sorry. He's sorry for what he's done."

Reese looked closely at his daughter's face, seeing the compassion and sympathy deeply etched. "Melissa, just moments ago he was trying to kill all of us and millions more. He's beaten now…he's weak. He'll say anything."

Matthew had returned to his sister and was standing at her side. "Lissa, as soon as Elohim leaves again, Lucifer will go back to the way he was. It's just who he is."

Blinking rapidly, Melissa turned and started walking toward the exit, followed by her brother. Reese followed, noticing Claire still hanging back, chewing on her bottom lip.

Reese was starting to turn back again, to return to her, when she asked, "Elohim, is there another way?"

Hearing the spoken support from her mother, Melissa stopped, as did Matthew, staying close to his sister.

Elohim, who had been looking at Cain, raised his eyes to Claire and answered, "No, Claire. There is not."

"But he's Your son…spiritually and physically. You, Elohim, created him. And the body You've chosen – Adam – actually conceived Cain. How can You do this to Your own spirit *and* to Your own flesh and blood?"

Elohim did not answer. The conflict between his emotions and his wisdom was written on his face. Profound sorrow furrowed his brow as his gaze returned to the face held within his grasp.

Michael spoke. For Reese and his family, it was the first time they heard his voice. It was a sound imbued with both power and love. "Father, I will obey You in all of Your wishes as I always have. If it is Your wish for our brother to remain, we will resume our struggle, continue our vigilance."

Elohim's eyes bored into Michael's. "He very nearly destroyed you and the others."

"This is true," Michael conceded. "And, if he is again loosed upon the Earth this night, it is inevitable there will be another clash on some distant day in the future." Gesturing toward Matthew, Michael continued, "The young man is correct. Lucifer cannot change who he is. Yet he is my brother. And You are my beloved Father. The struggle, the vigilance, the eventual clash…these are a price I am willing to pay, if it is Your wish."

Elohim absorbed Michael's words. His eyes, unfocused, gazed at some remote point, unseen by the rest. The angels and the mortals stood silently, waiting for the decision. The only sound was the soft whir and hum caused by the residual energy.

Elohim closed his eyes and slowly, deeply inhaled, gradually releasing the breath. Opening his eyes, he faced Reese. "You have been a wise counsel for me on the days of my visit. Share your thoughts with me now."

Reese, marshaling his thoughts, responded, "In one of our many talks, Elohim, we discussed the trait I most prized in my God. I insisted it was wisdom and You disagreed, telling me that I sought in God an ability to balance emotion and intellect, satisfying both." Reese hesitated before he continued, "You were correct. Your dilemma tonight cannot be resolved by the application of wisdom, intellect, whatever we want to call it. What is needed, unfortunately, is not among my strong points."

"My original intent for this visit was, again, not to intervene. You were quite persuasive, Reese, in your arguments against this path."

"I still believe that to be so. While You did not intervene, Your removal of the Chosen was, in itself, an intervention…a removal of a countervailing force. The balance was tipping. Even You believed this might have been Your final visit."

"It is true. All that you say is true. Yet now, I am left with this final deed, and I fear I am paralyzed, unsure of the best course."

"I know. I wish I could help." Resignedly, Reese weakly raised his arms from his sides, allowing them to drop back down. "I am sorry, Elohim. This choice is Yours alone."

Stooped, the weight of the decision bearing heavily on his shoulders, Elohim once more allowed his gaze to drift to a faraway place. No one moved as they waited, barely daring to breathe. All were aware of the import of Elohim's choice. The effect, upon Earth's future and untold generations yet to be born, was incalculable.

After several minutes of near silence, Elohim stiffened. Even before he spoke, they all knew he had reached a decision. "I cannot bear the thought of encasing my beloved son for an eternity. I will release you, Lucifer."

Melissa and Claire both gasped, releasing their pent-up tension as one. A soft "Ooohhh" came from Matthew, his disagreement with the decision obvious.

Reese began to speak but was interrupted. "NO!" Momentarily disoriented, Reese discerned that it was Lucifer himself who had uttered the single word.

Elohim looked down at the face and asked, "What, my son?"

"For endless ages I searched, looking only for Your love. Today, after wandering for so long, I have found it. Please, my Father, do not release me to wander again, for I fear I will lose my way. And when I do, I will once more lose the memory of Your love."

Elohim's voice shook. "You have begged for my forgiveness. Have you not learned? Can you not change your lot?"

Lucifer's face, a tragic mask, replied, "That I may not live with You and with my brothers in Heaven is an immutable fact, a reality even You cannot change, and a condition I accept. But the wisdom to understand and to accept this truth can only be attained in Your presence, as I am now. Denied that, I have no doubt I will eventually begin to succumb to the same resentment, anger and, eventually, hatred which led me before to become the being You saw today." Lucifer paused, agony bending and warping his visage. "I do not wish to become that being again, Father. I beg You, build my cell, make it strong. For living in a cage is far better than prowling this Earth, because in my cell I will hear the echoes of Your voice, and I will feel the remnants of Your touch for an eternity."

Unable to speak, unable to tear his eyes away from the soulful stare of Lucifer, Elohim simply nodded. The others, those of this time, understood

without further words. Melissa, breaking the trance, slowly moved toward the alcove exit. Her brother, mother, and father followed, leaving only the angels, Elohim, and Lucifer to remain.

Elohim, for a moment intended to last forever, clutched the essence of his creation to his bosom and wept, as Michael and the other angels stood patiently and watched. He, then, held Lucifer away once more. Without a word, the angels processed past them. Pausing one at a time, they added their aggregates of souls to the space between Elohim's hands. The energy, the consolidated essences added by them, swirled around Lucifer as if in orbit, until the final burden was delivered.

As the sphere had grown with each arrival, Elohim's hands had spread farther to accommodate it. With the task complete, Elohim peered into the center of the swirling mass and whispered, "Good-bye, my son," grief cracking his voice. Before the last reverberation of his farewell faded, a layer of gray, identical to the gray shell of clouds encompassing Earth, began to form around the bundle of energy. Thin and fibrous at first, the encapsulation spread and thickened. Transparency gave way to translucence, which begat obscura, eventually surrendering to opaque.

The orb, fully concealed and contained by the shell, was a threat to the angels no more. Commencing with Michael, they approached and laid their hands upon the cool, smooth surface, infusing it with their innately positive charge, building an impenetrable barrier from which Lucifer could never escape. After minutes passed, sensing that a full saturation had been achieved, the angels withdrew.

Carefully, as if carrying a delicate flower, Elohim walked from the alcove. The people, seeing him emerge, backed away to form a path which Elohim followed to the bottom of the steps. All of the angels followed him down and formed a circle around him when he stopped. The mass of people also encircled Elohim a short distance behind the angels.

Drawing upon the almost infinite energy waiting dormant in the space around him, Elohim, slowly at first, began to coat the gray shell with a smooth, metallic substance. Spreading his hands even farther, the size of the sphere grew as ply upon ply was added. Then the expansion ceased, yet the process did not. The sphere, roughly a yard in diameter, under the forces of

Elohim, although no longer gaining volume, continued accreting mass. The people, unable to look away, somehow sensed the growing density of the ball, a sense finally satisfied as they witnessed the first physical manifestations of the phenomenon.

All the members of the throng began to feel a faint breeze originating behind them, regardless of their orientation in the circle. The air was rushing in toward the sphere, absorbed by its mass. The need for the circle of angels also became apparent as all felt the tug upon their bodies, drawing them toward Elohim, toward the sphere.

Elohim gazed intensely at his work, not blinking, never looking away. Above him, the heavy, dark clouds revolved, sending down a thread of spinning, wispy grayness to connect to the sphere. Like water swirling down a drain, the clouds surged and twisted through the diaphanous funnel, pulled from every corner of the Earth, emptying the sky into Elohim's newest creation.

The mass of people were now compressed against the barrier of angels. A deafening crack was heard as the concrete beneath Elohim's feet buckled upward, struggling to break free in its inanimate attempt to satisfy the insatiable gravity of the orb. The soil beneath it, now released, gushed upward and disappeared into the shimmering orb. What was a whispering breeze had become a banshee scream and swept in dust and debris from all directions. At the very moment when it seemed the sphere would swallow the Earth itself, Elohim shifted it to his right hand. Arching back his arm, bending his knees, at lightning speed he hurled the orb into the sky, aiming for the darkest point in the handle of the Big Dipper. As the sphere rocketed upward, it attracted and absorbed the air around, leaving a vacuum in its wake. Immediately filling the void, the atmosphere collapsed upon itself, creating a thunderclap of a magnitude never before heard by man.

In the aftermath, silence pervaded the area, unappreciated by the still-ringing ears of the crowd. Reese, feeling a pressure on his arm, turned to see Claire inches from his face. Her mouth was moving, yet no sound penetrated. He shouted back, "I can't hear you," seeing her respond with a quizzical look, and knowing that she, also, was deafened.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Within minutes of Elohim's dramatic ejection of Lucifer, hearing began to return to the crowd. With people still mostly shouting to be heard, the chatter of voices was confusing and loud. In the midst of the melee, Reese, Claire, Matthew, and Melissa were joined in a jumbled embrace. Over Claire's shoulder, Reese spotted the middle-aged man who had been the first from the crowd to join the deadly conflict. Keeping one arm wrapped around Claire, he waved the man over with the other.

As he arrived, Reese, still speaking too loudly, said, "Wanted to thank you."

"Thank me for what?"

"If you hadn't come forward, I'm sure my family would have died."

"Well, you're welcome. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

Claire smiled, turning to face the stranger. "You broke the ice. After you did it, the rest followed."

Looking slightly embarrassed, the man responded, "Please don't give me all the credit. My wife, Kathy, told me I'd better do something." As the man spoke, he gestured toward a woman threading her way through the crowd to join them.

"Here she is now." He affectionately draped his arm around her waist. "This is my wife, Kathy."

"And this is Claire, my wife. And my children, Matthew and Melissa."

Then Kathy leaned forward toward Melissa, telling her, "I believe you were the hero today. If it wasn't for you, none of us would have helped."

Melissa just smiled broadly, saying, "Thanks."

Reese held out his hand to the stranger, introducing himself, "And I'm Reese. Reese Johnson."

"My name is Stanley Witherspoon. It's a pleasure to meet you."

From behind Reese came the excited voice of Walter Penfield. "Can you believe it? A black hole! He made a black hole and threw it into space!"

"Walter," Reese said, looking over his shoulder. "Was that what it was?"

“I’m sure.” Walter and Doris edged their way into the small circle as Penfield continued, “Pretty damn clever, actually. How else could He contain Lucifer forever? Nothing escapes.”

“But I thought Elohim said that anything sucked into a black hole is shot back in time?”

“He did, Reese. But that’s only what gets sucked in later, after the black hole is strong enough to accelerate the things it pulls in up to the speed of light. The core is trapped by its own mass, its own gravity.”

“From what I know about them, it wasn’t a black hole when it left, was it? I mean, it wasn’t pulling light into itself.”

“No, you’re right,” Penfield answered Reese. “It was the seed, a black hole being born, so to speak. Give it a little more time, maybe days or hours, maybe minutes, I don’t know. It depends on how efficiently it can gather mass on its trip.”

Margo courteously worked her way through the forest of bodies and joined the others. As she arrived, she flipped her cell phone closed. “He wasn’t bluffing.”

“Who?” asked Doris Penfield.

“Bennett, uh, Lucifer, that guy whose butt just got kicked.”

Claire suddenly became alarmed. “What do you mean? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s very okay. We’re starting to get reports from all over the place. Known terrorists, mercenaries-for-hire, just all-around bad guys are walking into local FBI offices, up to cops on the street, whatever, and just turning themselves in. They had planes, trucks…hell, donkeys loaded with materials. The lab boys haven’t gotten their hands on any of it yet, but the containers have all the right markings for it to be pretty nasty stuff.”

Reese asked, “What happened? The removal of Lucifer caused them to see the light, to reform?”

“I don’t think so,” answered Margo. “So far, what I’m being told is that they’re scared out of their wits. They’re babbling about visions, a man suddenly materializing in the cabin of their planes, that sort of thing. One or two of them actually thought it was Mohammed himself telling them they

were committing a sin, and then – here's the kicker – they all were given a glimpse of their eternal fate if they followed their orders."

"Must have been quite a peek," remarked Leo Schmidt, emerging from the throng to join them, followed by Bonavente.

"I bet it was," Margo answered.

Bonavente asked, "How is Elohim?"

"I don't know," answered Reese. "Right after His…after the…."

"Pitch?" Matthew offered, his eyes still wide from the memory of the spectacle.

"Yes…pitch, it is. Anyway, right after that, I lost sight of Him, as bunched up as we were and everything."

Flipping her cell phone open again, Margo punched the number for Bill Burke. He answered quickly. "Bill, Margo," she shouted into the mouthpiece. "Have you seen Elohim or Michael and the others?" She listened for a moment, covering her other ear with the palm of her free hand. "All right. Thanks." She snapped the phone closed and tucked it into her pocket, telling the others, "Bill is with Reynolds and McWilliams. They haven't seen them, either."

A murmur, a shift in the tone of the crowd all around them, caused Reese to sense a change. Looking around, he saw Elohim standing at the top of the steps in front of the building, facing the throng. The cadre of angels formed a semicircle behind him. As the onlookers began to surge toward Elohim, Reese and his friends joined them. The people moved partially up the steps, stopping approximately twenty feet short of the top, and creating an arc, completing the circle initiated by the angels.

As they moved closer, Melissa tapped her mother and exclaimed, "Look," pointing upward. The white dove was slowly circling above Elohim. As they watched, it perched upon a cornice projecting from the front of the building. Reese looked behind and saw that all of the people were moving forward toward Elohim. The mass of humanity completely filled C Street as well as the grounds in front of the National Science building and the other structures across the street.

In front of the building, parked on C Street and now engulfed in the midst of bodies, was a television news truck with its satellite link extended.

A videographer stood upon the roof platform behind a camera. The audio technician impatiently held a parabolic microphone at the ready, waiting for an opportunity to capture newsworthy sound. Reese had not been aware of their presence and was curious as to whether they had captured the earlier mind-boggling spectacle, broadcasting it out for the entire world to watch.

The streets extending to the south, toward the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the Mall, were filled as well. As had been the case with other gatherings around Elohim, the people surged forward to get as close to him as possible, without pushing too hard, without crushing against those in front.

Reese turned back to face Elohim. Having now edged close enough, he could see him clearly. Reese recognized a mixture of sadness, serenity, and determination set in the classic features as Elohim gazed out over the congregation, peacefully assembled under the now clear and star-filled sky.

With deliberate slowness, Elohim raised both arms from his sides, as if to embrace the gathering. As he did, the people hushed in anticipation. Lingering first for several moments, Elohim began to speak in a strong and resonant voice which effortlessly extended out over the mass of people, clearly heard by even those at the rear of the gathering.

“The time for my departure is near. It must be said before I leave that this visitation has been one of profound enlightenment and change. My own beliefs, my own concepts formed thousands of years before your birth and held throughout the ages, have now been forever altered by the wisdom of man. Throughout the tumultuous days of human history, mankind has suffered from an ever-burgeoning accretion of sinfulness, a growing burden of despair, envy, anger, hatred, and the other life-sapping attributes of evil. With no method for amelioration, no means for dissipation, this shadow of oppression deepened, threatening to engulf the heart and soul of each and every person on Earth.

“That which was originally intended to be a challenge…an occasion for each new man or woman to rise above the temptations of evil and show his or her true worth, spirit, and character…transmogrified into a nearly hopeless struggle against an overwhelming barrage.

“I have seen through my own eyes, as well as through the eyes of those among you, that since this precious home for mankind was becoming so saturated with the accrued bitterness of malevolence, a righteous soul, struggling to cling to its goodness, would be striving to resist the irresistible. What had begun as a trial was evolving into a punishment. That was not my intent.

“It was compassion. It was guilt felt and earned due to past actions which caused my inaction, which allowed the base and the corrupt to accumulate while, twice before, I removed from the Earth what should have been the counterbalancing influences. As the path to Heaven has become increasingly littered with the shards and pitfalls of an ever-increasing pervasiveness of temptation and evil, the expectations placed upon each of you to remain steadfast in your virtuousness, morality, and honor have been elevated to higher and more difficult degrees.

“This downward spiral, this descent into the very essence of despair, has now ended. The slate has been cleaned. The scales have been righted. Mankind and the Earth, upon which you live, have been purged of the accumulated detritus of a million loathsome souls, stranded and opportunistically exploiting the living. No longer will you hear their whispers in your ears, urging you to forsake your ideals. No more will you feel their tug at your minds and hearts, coaxing you to stray from your chosen path. They have been removed from your sphere, just as if an odorless yet toxic gas has been filtered from the air you breathe.”

Elohim’s visage softened and saddened, his voice lowering in timbre. “Gone, also, is Lucifer, my errant angel, the antecedent for my blindness to your plight. Having once been barred from Heaven, he has now been cast out from the Earth and shall never darken your souls again.

“All of this is not to say that mankind will be free of evil and its accoutrements, for you are imbued with the wondrous and dangerous gift of free will. As you live each moment of each day, you will continue to be forced to make countless decisions from a myriad of choices, a seemingly endless procession of dilemmas which cannot be ignored. It is that which you will choose, the course which you will take at every one of these moments, which will determine the path you are upon. Among the panoply

of options from which you choose at each of these moments, there will always be a selfish choice, an immoral choice, a choice that will be deleterious to your soul. Yet there will always be present a moral, selfless, and honorable choice. The responsibility to decide wisely has always been, and will always be, yours.

"I have only righted a wrong and restored a symmetry. Do not misconstrue my deeds, for I shall, again, not intervene in the processes and minutia of your lives. Who you become will be by your own determination. The perils and agonies and injustices of life will continue to beset you and test you and cause you to doubt my love. There can be no other way."

Elohim paused, gazing out upon the assembled, and smiled. "Buried within every person on Earth is a soul. That soul is a discreet, vibrant moiety of me, a portion of all that I am, splintered off and instilled singly into every new child of woman and man. From the instant of separation and infusion, the soul yearns to return, to reconnect, to reunite. That urge is shared with you, providing you the impetus to strive for an eternity in Heaven.

"I stand before you in the form of a man – not a man made from whole cloth, but the true progenitor of a mankind blessed with free will. All of you before me on this day have my blood coursing in your veins, for I have truly become this man, and he has become me. We are one and shall remain as one forever.

"It is because you carry within you a fragment of me – your soul – and because you are a progeny of my human descendants that you are all, unquestionably, my beloved children. As such, you are to be trusted with this most wonderful and powerful gift. You are to be allowed to grow and flourish. You are also to be permitted to fail, if that is your choice. Although I will not meddle…although I will not intercede in your lives, be assured I will not forsake you again.

"Through the ages you have suffered the presence of Lucifer. You have been made to tolerate and resist a malignant force, external to you and not of your own doing. His influence has tainted this world, just as a single drop of diseased blood contaminates a pool of water. From this day forth, the pool is cleansed."

Elohim paused again. Rising to an even more erect posture, his voice once again returning to its former timbre, he resumed. “Yet, purifying the Earth, removing the invidious scourge, in and of itself, does not make right the wrong you have all suffered at my negligence. There is more which must be done before I have made full restitution to my children.

“As has been promised, the Chosen shall depart this night to live in Heaven. And I shall depart with them. But this exodus need not be followed by turmoil and strife, as has befallen my children twice before. For this time I shall leave behind a gift….”

The air, which had been still throughout Elohim’s words, began to stir. The Holy Spirit swept down from the cornice and circled, tracing an orbit above Elohim’s head. Directly overhead, the brightness of one of the stars in Orion’s belt intensified until its radiance visibly brushed the Earth, brightening the night. From the star, a single, narrow beam reached down, piercing the sky and touching the stone next to Elohim’s feet.

Fine arcs of light from all directions appeared, converging on the beam, adding to its brilliance, expanding its girth. Coming from all points of the Earth, the sweeping, slender shafts merged, bending downward toward the space beside Elohim. Arcs of light suddenly sprang from the breasts of several of the gathered multitude, stretching to the brilliant column and contributing to the growing radiancy. The sheer volume of white fibers was so great that they fused, and it appeared as though the congregation was under a solid, white dome supported by a single Doric column.

When the phenomenon reached its zenith, the white threads began to blink out, the dome soon becoming diaphanous and continuing to diminish. As the final strand disappeared, the column of light, extending to Earth from the distant star, discernibly detached from the fiery point in the sky. The column retracted to Earth, like a slow-motion geyser with its source exhausted. While the assemblage watched, the tip of the spire of light descended from the cosmos to the very platform next to Elohim, dimming and resolving into a form…the figure of a man.

The full congregation gasped in recognition. For before them, facing Elohim, was the robed form of Jesus. The dove, the earthly form of the

Holy Spirit, was languidly flapping its wings above both Jesus and Elohim, hovering centered above their heads, forming the top of a triangle.

Jesus turned to the crowd and began to speak. His voice, a unique blend of gentleness and power, was immediately soothing to the congregation.

"My brothers and sisters, my heart is filled with great elation that I once again stand before you. The infinite love of our Father has prompted Him to return me to this form to walk among you…to live among you…again to teach and again to learn."

The silence from the vast, open area was remarkable. Not even sounds of distant traffic or the fluttering of a bird competed with his words. The multitude gazed upward, enraptured.

"I come to you today not as a leader to be followed. This world has no shortage of those who wish to lead. No edicts, no laws, no commands shall issue from my lips. And I do not come to you as a minister or priest. The great churches of the world have produced a legion of those who will fulfill that function. I am here…and here I shall remain, only as your brother and as your friend, until the last man and the last woman have drawn their last breaths on Earth."

Chapter Thirty-Five

The conference room within the State Department once more was filled with the familiar group as well as a few additions. Reese, Claire, Matthew, Melissa, Reynolds, McWilliams, Margo, Burke, Schmidt, Bonavente, and Walter and Doris Penfield were all seated around the table, each sipping coffee or soda and nibbling on the snacks requested by Bill Burke and provided by the staff.

Reese had his laptop open before him, polishing his final thoughts and recollections of the previous week. Claire, seated to his left, watched the typed words appear on the screen for a few minutes before wondering, "Is this really needed?"

Reese stopped typing and turned his attention to her. "What do you mean?"

"With what happened tonight…you know, Lucifer gone, Jesus coming to stay here…are your recountings of Elohim's words and deeds going to be read?"

Walter, overhearing the soft conversation, interjected, "I don't mean to butt in, but she has a point. I don't think the way things worked out was the way Elohim intended when He asked you to write it. I think He was just planning on leaving tonight, with the status quo intact. Your tract would have given those remaining something to think about and use to persuade others. With His Son here to stay…." His voice trailed off.

Reese listened to Penfield, deliberately considering the points. Before he could answer, Matthew stated confidently, "Dad's still gonna finish it. He's gonna leave it behind because he promised he would."

Smiling, Reese looked at his son. "That's right."

Mario cleared his throat gently. "Not all promises must be kept. Elohim said that Himself."

"It's almost done. I'm just about ready to wrap it up, anyway."

"I have a question," Margo Jackson said, changing the subject. "Before Jesus appeared, those streams of light coming from down here, from us, what were they?"

As a cardinal of the Catholic Church, Mario Bonavente felt an obligation to attempt an answer, when Leo Schmidt replied to Margo, “They didn’t come from all of us. Didn’t you notice?”

“Not really. I was a little distracted,” she replied, a slight chuckle affecting her voice.

“I was standing with Mario, right next to him. One came from him, none from me.”

“Of course!” exclaimed Bonavente.

Leo continued, “I believe it is the teaching of the Catholic and several of the Protestant faiths that your act of Communion is a literal partaking of Jesus.”

“We were giving it back!” Margo realized, awed.

“It would appear so,” answered Schmidt.

“If He was still here, within so many people, why wasn’t He enough of a counterbalancing influence against Lucifer? Why was Lucifer winning?” Reynolds asked thoughtfully.

“Two reasons,” Mario proposed, pulling a blank yellow pad from the center of the table and picking up a pen. “As Lucifer ‘turned’ more souls to his side, the numbers grew through the ages.” He drew a line from the bottom left corner of the paper to the upper right corner, signifying the mathematical increase. “As the numbers grew, the influence upon society strengthened, persuading more and more people to abandon their faith or to be disinclined to join the faiths at all.”

“Assisted, in no small way,” added Walter, “by the blandishments from the scientific community, claiming religious belief was a mental defect and a crutch for the moronic.”

“True. That didn’t help,” agreed Mario, drawing a second line from the top left corner down to the bottom right, making an “X” on the pad.

“At some point, the world reached this intersection.” He drew a circle at the middle of the page, where the two lines crossed. “From that moment on, the balance shifted. Before then, the ‘pluses’ outweighed the ‘minuses.’ Those on the good side not only held their own beliefs, they had the assistance of societal pressure to help them.”

“Ostracism,” Reese commented.

“Yes,” the Cardinal continued. “If individuals strayed too far from a life of decency and morality, they were viewed as outcasts, in some cases pariahs, not a role many relish. It was avoiding the ostracism by the mainstream that prompted many to remain good.”

Tapping the apex of the two lines again, he explained, “After this point was crossed, what was considered mainstream was altered. Soon, the indecent and the immoral were no longer outcasts.”

“They became celebrities,” offered Melissa.

“Exactly.” Bonavente nodded slowly. “Acts that were considered to be repugnant only decades ago are now perfectly acceptable.”

“We’ve had a joke in the Bureau for years now,” Craig said, “that it’s becoming harder and harder for blackmailers to make a living.”

“Sadly, that is true,” agreed Mario. “An indiscretion which would have caused a celebrity or even a politician to withdraw from the public eye in disgrace has become something to brag about. The result of this new societal paradigm is a turning of the tide, a reversal of the pressure, pushing the weak and the undecided in the wrong direction instead of the right one.”

“When I went to high school,” Claire recalled, “the few girls who were known to have had sex were considered to be tramps by the others; they were not the ones the boys wanted to bring home to their parents. That kept a lot of the girls in line.”

“Now,” Melissa added, “if you haven’t done it by your sophomore year, there’s something wrong with you.”

Mario sighed. “That is exactly what I’m talking about.”

“But my question was, why wasn’t His presence in so many people sufficient?” Reynolds asked again.

“Because, unlike Lucifer, who was opportunistic and relentless, Christ only went where He was invited,” answered Mario.

“And the invitations tapered off because of what you’ve described,” added Margo.

“Plus, as has been mentioned, there was the skimming of the very best twice before. In addition, the very essence of Jesus’ teachings was a passivity, an acceptance, not the aggressiveness of Lucifer. What we witnessed this evening was consistent with the personality of Elohim, as

some refer to Him – the God of the Old Testament, not the persona of Christ. Jesus taught us to resist Satan, not smite him."

McWilliams grinned, remarking, "Jesus is Gandhi…Elohim is Patton."

"That is accurate," acknowledged Bonavente. "Both have their places in the world. But the love of Jesus, planted within the hearts of the devout, was no match in the battle against unbridled evil."

"Like going to a knife fight unarmed," Bill Burke concurred. "The other guy isn't playing by the same rules."

Reese muttered to himself, "Finished." He dramatically tapped the ENTER key and leaned back from the laptop computer.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Doris.

"I just put it on my department's website," he answered, staring at the screen. No one spoke for a moment.

The silence was broken by Bill Burke. "I think I'll be going home. I want to be with my family tonight."

McWilliams stood. "Me, too. Dorothy's waiting for me."

Reluctantly, as if feeling that there was unfinished business, they all began to rise. Claire turned to Reynolds and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Nicholas, for everything."

"Hey," he said, trying to keep his voice light. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Promise?" Melissa asked, tears welling in her eyes as she stood next to her mother.

"That I do," he answered, hugging the teenager.

Reese walked to McWilliams. "I want to thank you, Craig."

"For what? I didn't do much."

"That's not true. More than once, when I was getting all caught up in the details of things, your…uh…insights helped to clarify things for me."

"I couldn't agree more," Leo added.

Smiling, Craig responded, "I always have had a way of cutting through the BS." His face became more serious. "Reese, none of us could have held it together the past few days without you."

"I'll second that," Walter Penfield spoke pensively. "You had a way of making me see myself in a different light. I needed that."

Reese noticed Margo Jackson standing to the side. When their eyes connected, volumes were silently spoken. She stepped forward and lightly kissed Reese on the cheek. He gave her a brief hug. As they stepped back, she said, “See you tomorrow,” and reached for the doorknob.

She opened the door to the hallway, and they all started to file out, when Mario stopped and looked back. “Leo, come with us.”

All turning, they saw the Rabbi, sadness filling his face. Attempting a smile, he answered, “I am. I’m right behind you.”

“You know what I mean. Tonight. Join us.” Bonavente’s voice was soft and imploring.

As he looked down at the carpet, Leo’s answer was barely audible. “I, too, made a promise.”

Bonavente assured him, “The eyes of the world have been opened tonight. There is nothing more for you to do here. Your departure to Heaven would reverberate resonantly through your faith, more loudly than your words ever could. Even Moses found that it was right to break his promise.”

“He’s right, Leo,” Reese agreed. “After this evening, there cannot be any doubt.”

“Please,” Claire urged, “come with us.”

“I cannot. There is much work to be done. When the rose has died, it is too easy to forget its beauty and its fragrance. When the sun rises tomorrow and Elohim has gone, so, too, will rise up the voices of discontent.”

“But Jesus will be here,” Melissa reminded him.

“That is even more reason for me to stay. The Jews refused to acknowledge Him two thousand years ago. That cannot happen again.”

Mario started to speak, and Leo cut him off by raising his hand. “I am decided, my friend. Please, if you say more, it will only make me more sad than I am.”

Heartbreak written on his features, Bonavente respected the Rabbi’s wish and did not speak. Instead, he stepped forward and enfolded Leo in his arms. After their long embrace, Mario stepped back and each of the others, in turn, also hugged the Rabbi.

As the last of the eleven hugged Leo, Mario, tears trickling down his cheeks, held him by the shoulders and said, “I will miss you, my friend.”

Leo, also tearful, replied, “My lifetime will pass in but the blink of your eye…as will the lifetimes of all of the others who will await Elohim’s return. I will see you soon enough.2”

The Cardinal fought back a sob, merely nodding in response. Loosening his grasp from Leo’s shoulders, he turned and followed the others into the hallway.

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As the night swept across the face of the Earth, inexorably bringing the promised moment to each continent, the Chosen, having said their farewells and tidied up their earthly affairs, exhausted and filled with ennui, climbed into their beds. Filled with wonder…overcome with trepidation and uncertainty, convinced slumber would elude them throughout the night, they surrendered to the darkness of a deep and profound sleep.

The End

Other books by John David Krygelski

If you enjoyed reading ***The Harvest*** by John David Krygelski, you may wish to consider his other novels.

The Aegis Solution

In this, John David Krygelski's third and perhaps most powerful novel yet, he creates a spine-tingling story of suspense, drama, and intrigue. After the only child of the President – his teenaged daughter, Neve – commits suicide in a violent and senseless act, President Walker proposes an institution where people who have lost all hope may enter.

Motivated by his grief and compassion, Aegis, intended to be a civilized alternative to suicide, is built and opened. There are only two rules in Aegis: no communication is allowed between the outside world and those who enter, and once individuals go in…they can never leave.

Twelve years pass and what began as a noble social experiment has turned into a hideous nightmare, fraught with controversy and public outrage. In response, Elias Charon is selected by the new President to be the first to enter Aegis and be allowed to leave. Ostensibly sent in to investigate the claims of abuse, a darker and heinous personal motive arises.

With pulse-pounding suspense, *The Aegis Solution* takes the reader through a twisting, turning plot to an explosive and electrifying climax.

Praise for John David Krygelski's third novel – *The Aegis Solution*

"Once I started *The Aegis Solution*, I could hardly put it down. It was truly captivating, thrilling, and awe-inspiring. Thank you for such an outstanding read. It almost felt like I was there in Aegis with 'Mr. Death' and the lot!"

"I enjoyed it – of course! Again, a fantastic read! Cover to cover I was trying to decide where you were going, and I had many roads open, yet you

led me down one I hadn't seen. Thanks for another fun ride. I look forward to your next literary entry! Don't make us wait too long!"

"I really enjoyed reading *The Aegis Solution*! Loved it, in fact. The characters were full of life, and I can see how something like this could happen. It gave me goosebumps."

"*The Aegis Solution* not only had me dying to know what happened next, I found myself intrigued by concepts, and deep in thought for most of my experience. I can't seem to find a word to describe how much I loved the book."

"I just finished reading *The Aegis Solution*, and I was totally enthralled from start to end. This book is by far my favorite of the three, with so many changes and points that caught me off-guard. I love the character Tillie. She was so stubborn and had strong opinions about what had happened and what could happen."

"Wow! That was quite good. I had trouble putting it down."

"I finished *The Aegis Solution* on my way home for the holidays. I must say, you have impressed me once again."

Time Cursor

Jack Augur comes back from thirty years in the future to stop his own wedding. Although warned of the dire consequences if he tampered with any other events, within minutes of meeting his younger self, he is responsible for the accidental death of the man who is to eventually invent the time machine. As the older and younger versions of the same man join forces to undo the damage they've done and get the world back on track, mysterious beings thwart their every attempt. *Time Cursor* is a roller-coaster ride of suspense, action, and intrigue with an ending that will not disappoint.

Praise for John David Krygelski's second novel – *Time Cursor*

"It is amazingly brilliant, right there with some of the best I've read. In terms of science fiction, it's up there with greats like Heinlein; definitely a book I'm going to make sure stays in my possession."

"I couldn't put it down! I really enjoyed it. I truly hope that they make a movie out of it!!! Seriously…it was amazing!!! The ending freaked me out!!! :) I actually was sad when I finished it!!!!"

"The only thing I can say is **WHAT A RIDE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!** Far exceeded my expectations. I've been reading SF since Asimov & Bradbury started, and this was a treat and a blast. Thanks again for a great run."

"I just finished reading *Time Cursor*; I started yesterday. After reading both of your books, I have to say I cannot wait for the next."

"Finished the book yesterday…WOW! Great story – super plot. Really twisted my mind on the intricacies of time travel, or time segment repositioning, if you prefer."

"I finished it over the weekend…LOVED it!!! Never saw the ending coming."

"Just finished *Time Cursor*, and I loved it! So enjoyable to read a book that wasn't dumbed down!"

"In short, it's amazing and I could not wait to finish it."

"Just finished *Time Cursor*. What an amazing ride! The twists and turns, the surprises…and what an ending! I loved the players and their relationship to each other."

“What an incredible read!!! Quite the twist at the end that I wasn’t expecting.”

“Just finished *Time Cursor* this morning, another phenomenal tale! Great effort! An intriguing roller-coaster of a plot along with engaging dialogue.”

You can order a personalized and autographed copy of ***The Aegis Solution*** or ***Time Cursor*** in either the softcover or the hardcover edition by going to ***www.starsyspublishing.com***.

Coming soon

Grabbing the Brass Ring
Michael Earl Nolan

This epic saga of the life of Richard Mansan, a front-line fighter and adventurer who recognizes early in life that he is destined to "grab the brass ring," is masterfully written with uncanny insights into human character. During Mansan's far-flung, iliadic exploits, he forms lifelong friendships with the great leaders of his day: General O'Riley, his courageous battlefield commander whose own nation eventually turns its back on him; Tyron Jrcy, a young foreign soldier whom Mansan sends safely on his way and who later becomes his nation's Chief Council; and Nele Martel Moran, the feisty youngster who serves under Mansan on her parents' fishing fleet and who later becomes the visionary President of her nation.

All three are profoundly and irrevocably influenced by this extraordinary, unconventional man. When the world crises worsen to the breaking point, Mansan himself receives the ultimate mantle of power, the daunting responsibility for humanity's survival. This futuristic novel grapples with the frailties and strengths of humankind, the nature of true leadership, and the possible destiny of planet Earth; it is as prophetic as it is exciting.

Included with the novel is the fascinating biography of the author – a legendary, real-life hero. Truly a "Renaissance man," Nolan distinguished himself on the field of battle with the United States Marine Corps in World War II; in college and professional football, track and field, and boxing; in engineering; and in the hearts and minds of all he met.

About the Author

John David Krygelski, a semi-native of the southwestern desert, has written two novels subsequent to ***The Harvest***. His second release – ***Time Cursor*** – is a mind-bending time-travel adventure about a man who travels back from thirty years in the future with the goal of preventing his younger self from going through with the biggest mistake of their life. Delving into the paradoxes of time travel, ancient aliens, and the pitfalls of tampering with your past, it is a masterful, fast-paced adventure.

His third novel – ***The Aegis Solution*** – an intense suspense/thriller, takes you on an unexpected journey into an isolated world of individuals who have given up on life and society. It is a journey of desperation, punctuated by periods of confusion and excitement, as the main characters seek to unravel the mysterious circumstances and sequences of events that have brought them all together. It is a tale of high espionage, genetic manipulation, societal evolution, love, and hope.

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